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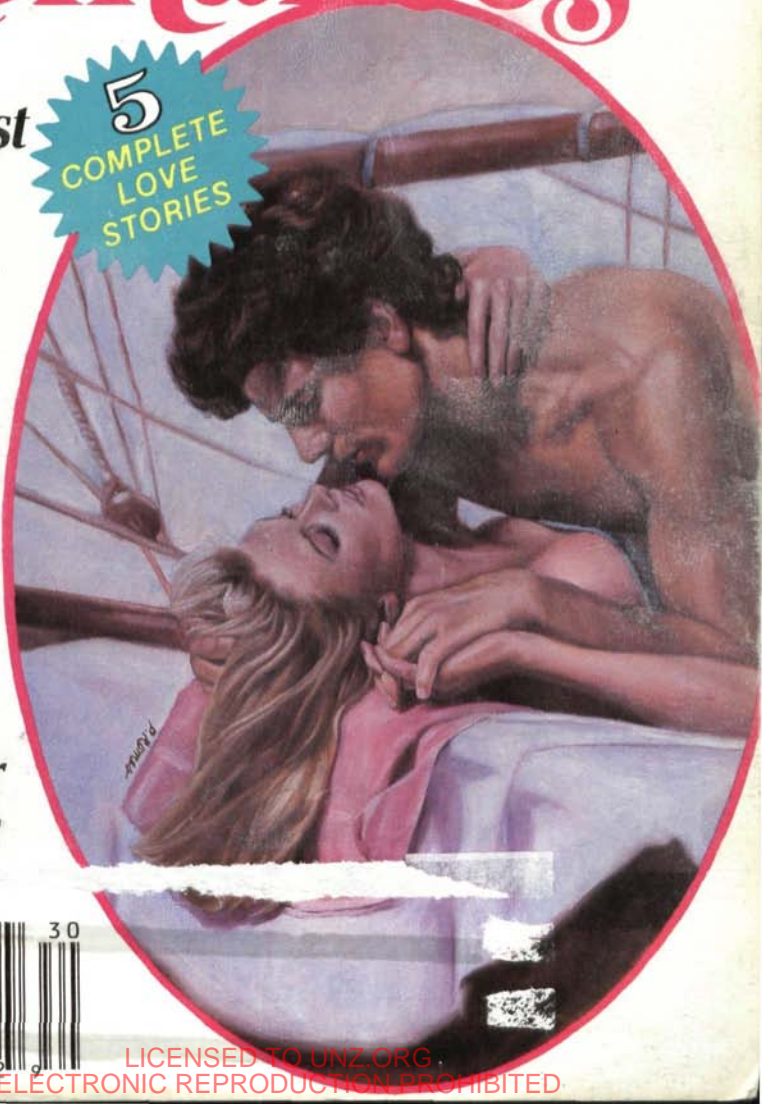
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AUG/SEPT 1988 • VOLUME 6 NO. 4

## CONTENTS

HEAVEN'S PRICE .....	by Sandra Browne .....	2
FOOD FOR THOUGHT .....	by Ann Smith .....	42
A MATTER OF MAGIC .....	by Linda Hampton .....	67
ASPEN HOLIDAY .....	by Karlyn Thayer .....	92
BREAKFAST IN BED .....	by Sandra Browne .....	118

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# Heaven's Price

---

*No man had ever breached the wall around Blair Simpson's heart. But then her dancer's body, which had never betrayed her before, began to long for Sean Garrett's impassioned caresses.*

---

SANDRA BROWN

---

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Blair Simpson carted the last box up the stairs, maneuvered it through the door, and dropped it. Her arms quivered from the exertion. Her legs ached. She noticed the tightness of the muscles in her lower back and groaned. Was there any part of her body that didn't ache?

She glanced at her watch, her lips thinning with irritation. She had called the YMCA over two hours ago and asked them to send over a masseur. Not having changed residences in more than eight

years, she had forgotten how physically exhausting moving could be, and a massage was the most relaxing thing she could think of. Since her telephone hadn't been installed yet, she had driven to the nearest service station and used the pay phone. The receptionist who answered the Y's telephone had assured her that someone would be sent over within an hour.

"So much for efficiency," she muttered, whisking off the bandana she had tied around her long hair. If the staff of the



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
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YMCA typified the pace of life in this backwater town, she'd be a raving maniac in a week.

She gazed around the apartment that would be her home for the next six months. Upon arrival from Manhattan to the small town on the Atlantic side of Long Island where her friend Pam Delgado had moved several years ago, Blair had to admit that a garage apartment behind a Victorian house on a quiet, tree-shaded street had more appeal than a concrete cracker box.

She made her way to the small kitchen on the other side of the large room that served as both living and sleeping area. Taking a few ice cubes from the refrigerator, she plunked them into a tall glass she'd managed to find earlier and popped off the top of a diet soda can. Just as it was foaming over the ice, someone knocked on the door.

"Wouldn't you know it," she grumbled as she weaved her way through the boxes and pulled open the door.

"It's about time," she said querulously.

"I beg your pardon."

Blair's eyes were level with a massive chest, and she had to lift them a considerable distance to greet the most marvelous assembly of masculine features she had ever seen. She felt like stammering, but somehow managed not to. "Didn't anyone tell you how to get here?"

He shook the head that was capped with blond wavy hair, slightly silvered at the temples. "No."

"Well, it's no wonder you're over an hour late. None of the streets in this town are marked with signs," she said crossly. "Come on in. I need you more now than I did when I called."

He stepped through the door and she closed it behind him to conserve the cool air that flowed from the air-conditioning unit. He hadn't brought any equipment in with him, only a body that would intimi-

date the most fearsome professional football lineman.

Clad in white shorts and a navy-blue T-shirt, the man looked marvelous. Blair excused her interest as purely professional. As a dancer she was well acquainted with every muscle of the human body, its use, and how to treat it.

"Didn't you bring a portable bed or table or anything with you?" she asked.

He stopped and turned to face her. "No."

She sighed. "It's just as well. I don't know where we would have put it. I haven't made up the bed in the sofa yet and I need you right now. Do you mind doing it on the kitchen table?"

His eyes crinkled at the corners, but there wasn't even the slightest smile when he answered levelly. "Not at all."

His laconic answers annoyed her. She felt like a babbling moron. He hadn't even apologized for being late. She strongly suspected that just beneath his placid features was a booming laugh dying to be freed. Why, she couldn't fathom.

She tracked the path his eyes took down the length of her body. Never having known a moment's modesty in her life, the sudden impulse to cover herself was foreign, but there nonetheless.

Had he made some lascivious remark like the ones that were often thrown to her on the streets of New York, she would have flung back a scathing insult. Or had he commented clinically on her good muscle tone, the length and formation of her legs, her graceful carriage, she would have thanked him and never given it a thought. Those kinds of comments she could handle.

"Well, shall we get started?" he asked. The corners of his mouth lifted in the suggestion of a smile.

"Don't you want me to undress first?"

One brow leaped into a quizzical arch. "I guess so. Yes."

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"I'll be just a minute then." She hurried into the bathroom, where she had brought out an old sheet from one of the boxes. Her fingers fumbled with the fastening on her shorts. Why was she so nervous? She'd had massages before, many in the privacy of her apartment in Manhattan. Never had she been anxious about it. Maybe she shouldn't go through with it.

One shooting pain from her legs told her she would be foolhardy to pass up this opportunity. Her abused muscles needed soothing, and the doctor had recommended this sort of therapy. She was being silly. In her near thirty years, she'd never been fainthearted about anything. Wrapping the sheet around her naked body, she opened the bathroom door and stepped out.

"I take it you didn't bring any lotion either," she said, brushing past him disdainfully.

"No, I didn't bring any lotion."

"I should be glad. Sometimes the lotions masseurs use smell medicinal. You can use this." She handed him the plastic bottle she'd brought from the bathroom. "And here are some towels for when you . . . for when you need them," she finished self-consciously.

She wished he wouldn't look at her as though he were about to devour her. She had shared matchbox-sized dressing rooms with men and women all racing to get into the next costume change. Often she'd been forced to forego a trip to the dressing room and change just offstage with no screening whatsoever. Why now was she seized by a maidenly awareness of her nakedness beneath the sheet?

She moved to the rectangular table in the kitchen that was barely long enough for her to lie on. She had draped it with an old quilt she'd found in the top of one of the apartment's two closets.

"That looks comfortable," he said.

"The table?"

"The quilt."

"Oh." She looked down at the faded spread. "I guess so. It isn't mine. It came with the apartment."

She turned her back to him and lay face down on the table, adjusting herself as comfortably as she could. Folding her hands one on top of the other, she lay her cheek on the back of the top one and turned her face away from him.

"Do you like this apartment?" he asked conversationally.

"It's okay for someplace temporary. I'll be here six months at the most."

"Are you from the city?"

"Not originally," she answered. She held her breath for a moment when she felt him raise the sheet and slide a towel over her hips, covering them.

"Originally where are you from?"

"Minnesota." The word came out in a gush of air as his palm held the towel over her hips in place while he tossed the sheet aside. Naked but for the towel, which felt about as large as a Band-Aid across her derriere, she could all but feel his scorching gaze.

Long moments passed. He didn't speak. She didn't breathe. Neither moved. Finally, unable to bear the suspense, she turned her head toward him. "Is something wrong?"

He cleared his throat. "No. Nothing. I was just flexing my fingers."

"Oh."

She felt rather than saw his movements as he poured some lotion onto his palm. Then his hands settled on her shoulders. Moving slowly at first, he bore down gently on the tense muscles and smoothed the scented lotion over them. Increasing the pressure slightly, his hands began to work magic, and Blair felt her tension dissolving.

"Have you worked for the Y long?"

"The Y? Uh . . . no. Actually I don't work there. I sort of free-lance."

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"I see. Do you have enough clients to keep you busy in a town this size?"

"You'd be surprised."

Both hands were on one shoulder now, squeezing the ever-relaxing muscles. "Your hands don't feel like most masseurs'. They have calluses."

"I'm sorry."

"I wasn't complaining. It was only an observation."

"I work out with weights fairly often. They leave calluses."

"So you're into all kinds of physical fitness."

"I guess you could say that."

"I thought so. You seem very fit."

"So do you." The heels of his hands were planted in the groove of her spine, and Blair realized that with only the merest pressure, they could crack her ribs.

"I'm a dancer. I have to stay in shape."

"What kind of dancer? A ballerina?"

"I attend ballet class every day to work out, but I dance mostly in musical comedies."

"Hey! What shows have you been in?"

She laughed lightly. "At one time or another nearly all of them, both on and off Broadway. Sometimes with a road company for months at a time."

"You've been at it for a long time then."

"Yes. Since graduating from high school. Much to my parents' dismay, I came to New York when everyone else was going off to college."

"They didn't want you to?"

"That's an understatement. Even getting my degree by going to night classes didn't convince them that I wasn't on the road to destruction. I had told them for years that I was going to New York to study and dance and they humored me, thinking I'd outgrow the notion, or that I'd meet some nice hometown boy and replace hopeless dreams with marriage."

"Surely they're proud of you now."

"Yes, but it's a qualified pride," she re-

plied slowly. Reminders of the heartache she had brought her parents always made her sad. For so many years she had sought their approval of her way of life. It was an impossible dream that she would never attain, for they would never understand her compulsion to dance. "They won't consider me successful until I marry and present them with a passel of grandchildren."

His thumbs were melting each vertebra, taking weariness with them. Blair's eyes closed with a sigh of pure pleasure.

"You must be their one and only."

"That's just it," she mumbled sleepily against the back of her hand, "I have two brothers and a sister who have provided them with more grandchildren than they can afford to keep in birthday presents."

He chuckled, and she liked the sound. It was as soothing as his hands. "I guess that's the way parents are. They're not happy until their children conform to their idea of success."

"Maybe there's hope for the next generation of parents. My friend Pam has five children and she treats each one as an individual. You may know her. She lives here in Tideland and is responsible for my being here. Pam Delgado."

"I know the Delgados."

"If you'd known Pam ten years ago, you'd never believe her now. She gave up dance to marry Joe and live in the suburbs. I still can't quite believe that my friend who suffered through starvation diets and rigorous classes with me is now the happy mother of five little Delgados."

"You don't approve of her decision?"

Blair shrugged. "It wasn't for me to approve or disapprove. It's just that I can't understand anyone giving up dance who isn't absolutely forced."

His hands left her long enough to get more lotion. When next he began, they were on the backs of her knees.

"If you're so dedicated to dance, what

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are you doing out here?"

He was kneading the muscles of one calf. The rhythmic motion brought on a delicious lassitude. She stirred restlessly as his hands moved up to the backs of her thighs. "I . . . I have to stop dancing for a while under doctor's orders."

Both hands came to a stand still. "Why?"

"My knees, mostly. I have some tendon and cartilage damage that needs time to knit."

"How long before you can dance again?"

"Six months," she said quietly, remembering the anguish that had pierced through her when she heard the doctor say those fatal words. He was the third specialist she had consulted, not accepting the diagnoses of the first two.

The hands began massaging again. "That sounds serious."

"Well it's not," she snapped. She closed her eyes, squeezing out the facts she didn't want to accept. "It's not," she said more softly, but with just as much conviction. "Things like this happen to professional dancers all the time—tendinitis, muscle sprain, shin splints. A few months' rest and I'll be fine."

"You can't dance at all?"

"I can do minimal workouts to retain muscle tone. Nothing strenuous."

"Did you carry all those boxes up by yourself?" he asked.

"Yes. Pam lent me her station wagon for a few days. I drove it from the city this morning and didn't want to wait for anyone to help me unload it."

"Carrying all that weight up the stairs couldn't have been good for your knees."

"It didn't hurt them." Actually they had been hurting, but she wanted to deny that just as she wanted to deny that there was anything wrong with them in the first place. She was playing a childish game with herself and she knew it. Ignoring the

problem wouldn't make it go away. But she wasn't ready to admit that she might have to give up dancing forever. That was as good as admitting that she would have to give up breathing.

"Surely you could have asked for someone to help you."

"Pam said she and Joe would come over later to help me, but I didn't want to impose on them. There's a man who lives in the house across from me. I'm leasing the apartment from him. Pam said to ask him for anything I needed, but I haven't seen him. He had given Pam a key for me and I picked it up for her this morning."

"You haven't met him then?"

"No, he's a friend of Pam's. He's a carpenter or something like that."

"I'm sure he wouldn't have minded helping a dainty thing like you lug all those boxes up here."

"Probably not," Blair said, "but I don't want to be obligated to my neighbors."

"I see."

His hands left her and she heard a chair scrape across the floor as he pulled it to the end of the table. A glance over her shoulder showed him sitting down.

Taking one of her slender feet in his palm, he began stroking the sole with his thumb. "What in the world did you do to these feet?"

She laughed. "Ugly, aren't they? Toe shoes, blisters worn into calluses, bigger blisters, more calluses."

He laved lotion over the bumps and knobs, then lifted her feet one at a time and rotated each ankle. "No, no, relax," he said quietly when she began to do his work for him. "Let me move it." When he was finished with her feet, he stood and bent her knee back, rotating it in the same way, but gently enough not to hurt her. She relinquished what small control she stubbornly maintained and let him work the kinks out of the tired muscles until her joints seemed to move as they hadn't for

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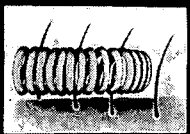
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weeks.

A perfect languor blanketed her until she felt like every bone in her body had gone as limp. Her eyelids refused to remain open. She never wanted this hour with the man with the gifted hands to end. He had given her the relaxation she'd thought she'd never know again after leaving the doctor's plush Park Avenue office and limping home with tears of angry frustration rolling down her cheeks:

"You can turn over now," a low, compelling voice instructed her. She gave no thought to disobeying, but rolled over with one supple motion, her eyes still closed. She heard what could have been a soft gasp before she felt the cool towels being spread across her body. Something about that gasp should have bothered her, she knew, but she was too sleepy to concentrate on it.

He moved to the other end of the table to stand behind her head. "Have I ever seen you dance?" he asked in the tone of a hypnotist asking, "Are you asleep now?" His hands closed around her jaw, his thumbs massaging just in front of her ears.

Grateful she still had the wherewithal to understand her native language, she said gruffly, "I don't know. Have you?"

"Tell me something I might have seen you in."

"I was a figure on a pinball machine. A giant silver ball rolled toward me and I did a leapfrog over it."

"I've seen that, but—"

"You wouldn't recognize me. I had on a silverfoil wig and huge daisy-shaped sunglasses with bright yellow lenses."

He rested his thumbs at the center of her hairline. "I can't imagine you in a silver wig. I can't imagine you as having anything but glossy black hair. Daisy-shaped sunglasses with yellow lenses?" he asked softly. "No. Nothing but green eyes as fathomless as the sea." As on command, they opened to give him their full atten-

tion. His index finger traced the smooth, perfect arch of her dark brow.

Blair knew she shouldn't be allowing this. He might be a degenerate—but she could think of no reason she wanted to stop the inevitable. She could see each facet in his diamond blue eyes, and they paralyzed rational thought with their brilliance.

"I can't imagine you as being any way except exactly as you are. I wouldn't change a thing." The fingers that had been caressing her cheeks were replaced by the silky touch of his mustache. Imperceptibly but inexorably he moved closer to her mouth until he hovered above it. She breathed in the intoxicating bouquet of his breath. Just as she was expecting the pressure of his lips on hers, someone knocked on the door.

She stifled her murmur of regret. He sighed and brought himself upright. Hastily she sat up and groped for the sheet, hot color rising to her cheeks as she watched him wade through the boxes to casually open her front door.

"Hi." The voice was masculine, but lacking in maturity. "Sorry to be so late, but someone at the desk got their wires crossed." The tall blond man didn't seem inclined to respond. The younger man, wearing white trousers and a white T-shirt with YMCA printed in red letters on the left breast pocket, said with a questioning inflection, "I'm the masseur."

Blair sat on the edge of the table clutching the twisted sheet to her, her hair a tangled dark cloud. Her face, so flushed only moments ago, drained to a chalky white.

"We won't be needing you now," the blond man said casually.

The young man's eyes swept past the broad shoulders to see the disarrayed Blair on the table, and he assessed the situation immediately. "I see what you mean," he said slyly.

"Go ahead and bill Miss Simpson for



# FACESHAPING:

## Surgery-free facelifting techniques to rescue sagging skin and control the signs of aging.

Good news for every woman who is starting to notice those tell-tale signs of aging on her face. Recently introduced from Europe is an ingenious little electronic device that works on the principle of passive exercise.

In other words, this unit gently exercises your facial muscles back into condition without any active effort on your part. The battery operated device delivers a mild electronic impulse to your muscles, causing them to gently contract and relax over and over again.

These units are still awaiting marketing approval in the United States by the FDA. They retail in Europe and Canada for about \$250.

Dubbed the "youth secret of the rich and famous," this treatment has allowed many a movie star of 50 to look 35, without having a facelift operation!

Interestingly, the very best faceshaping results were obtained by combining the passive exercise unit with an active facial isometrics program.

This isometric program can also be used effectively without the passive exercise unit. Results showed that the passive exercise unit was excellent for toning the upper-cheeks,



*Contrary to what most people believe, we make our most accurate judgments about age based on the contours of the face. Instinctively, we look for things like droopy eyelids, sagging jowls or a flabby neck to tell us someone's age. These tell-tale shapes of aging are never seen on the faces of the young. No matter how many lines show on our face, it is only when our facial muscles begin to sag that we start to look old.*

mouth and jawline. For the eye area, chin and neck, the isometric program was the winner.

**How long before you see results?** Improvements are seen within the first three weeks. But as with all exercise programs, these results are directly related to the time and effort invested. Also, once you have got your face and neck back into shape, you still have to maintain the exercise program three times a week to retain benefits.

**What's the ideal age to start?** Research shows that no woman is too old to benefit from either of these programs. Certainly, visible improvements can be seen no matter when you begin. And if you are under 35, remember that your youthful face won't last forever. A regular facial workout with an isometric program is an excellent

preventative against sagging skin and wrinkles.

The exercise program, which takes about 20 minutes, leaves the skin feeling stimulated and vibrant. This wonderful feeling is the result of the stimulation of peripheral blood vessels beneath your skin which helps give your skin a healthy, youthful glow.

In Canada, the McLellan Research Institute has just compiled all of its research on both passive exercise using the electronic device and facial isometrics into a newly published book called "Face Savers".

This book, an absolute must for anyone with droopy eyelids, sagging cheeks or jawline, double chin or flabby neck, contains 21 of the best facial isometric exercises. Detailed drawings help you understand the cause of your particular problem. The book is illustrated by over 75 photographs of top Canadian model Yanka, demonstrating each of the exercises.

If you have noticed a droopy laughline or sagging skin under your chin when you look at your face in the mirror there is one thing you can be certain of - it's not going to get any better unless you do something about it.

*Face Savers*  
A training manual designed to help you improve your face.  
By Meagan McLellan



"Of course exercise can improve facial contours," says top Canadian model Yanka Van Der Kolk, pictured here. Yanka is also the mother of 25-year old twins! "If the muscles of the body can be toned by exercise, and we know they can, then so can the muscles of the face."

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"With faceshaping technology, no woman needs to contemplate a surgical facelift to achieve a younger looking face. People rarely come close to guessing that I am 42 years old. I just wish that every woman would take a few minutes a day to exercise her face. It can make such a difference!"

—Meagan McLellan

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your time."

"Yeah. Sure. Thanks." He winked at the blond man before picking up his leather bag of supplies and clumping down the stairs.

Blair was off the table before the latch clicked. "Who the hell are you? How dare you take advantage of me like this? Get out of here, or I'm calling the police."

"On what? You've no telephone yet," he said reasonably. A broad grin split his mouth and showed her a beautiful set of gleaming white teeth. "The telephone company called today. An installer will be out the day after tomorrow."

"Who—"

"Sean Garrett. I'm your landlord. The carpenter and neighbor you don't want to be obligated to."

"You tricked me!" she shouted, lightning flashing from her eyes.

"No I didn't. I never said I was a masseur. You didn't give me a chance." He walked toward her and she found herself backing up instinctively. "Indeed, up to a point, I wasn't sure what service I was expected to perform."

"You—"

"Let's see, you said you needed me now more than ever. You asked if I minded doing it on the kitchen table since the bed hadn't been made up. And you offered to undress. Now, what is a man supposed to think hearing words like those?"

"You know good and well I mistook you for someone else. The decent thing to do would have been to identify yourself. I don't see how I can live here now."

Whatever she expected of him, it wasn't the laughter that thundered out of his chest. His smile widened, and he threw back his head in pure enjoyment. "So the heavenly body and innocent eyes are deceptive. Beneath them lurks the soul of a tigress. I like you, Blair Simpson."

"Well I don't like you," she shouted. "You're a liar and a sneak. Get out!"

"I never lied," he said with maddening calm while she thought she would burst with anger.

"What would you call it?"

"I told you honestly that I didn't work for the Y. I said I was a free-lancer, which I am. I'm a contractor. You asked if I had enough clients and I said that you'd be surprised. I do have many clients. I buy old houses, restore them structurally, then sell them to wealthy city-dwellers who want a vacation home near the beach. So you see, everything I told you is the truth."

"But misleading."

He shrugged, his mouth tilting into a mischievous grin. "As I said, what's a man to do under such circumstances? When a beautiful woman offers to take off her clothes and lie down on the kitchen table, do you know any real man who would politely turn and leave?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

He wasn't impressed, as his nonchalant shrug testified. "I don't criticize anyone for his lifestyle. I only know what my sexual preferences are. And a beautiful woman wearing only a bedsheet, lying docile and pliant and begging for my touch appeals to me greatly."

"Begging! I didn't. . . the only reason I was letting you touch me is because I thought you were a professional masseur. Had I known—"

"Don't try to tell me you weren't enjoying it. You were practically purring." He moved toward her until his mouth was only a breath away from hers.

"I'll tell you something else. Don't you know what can happen to ladies when they act so carelessly?" The mustache made a brushing pass across her lips. "All kinds of perverts are walking the streets. If you had let one of them in instead of me, something terrible might have happened to you."

His lips pressed against hers and what

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little will she had remaining sifted through the barriers of her mind like the last grains of sand in an hour glass. She felt herself gravitating toward his body as though pulled by a magnet. When her senses finally returned, the first thing that registered on her desire-clouded mind was his victorious grin. Then, any lingering passion she felt was immediately swapped for rage.

She shoved him away from her with one hand, risking her hold on the sheet. "Get out!" she screamed. *You're* the only pervert I've ever had the misfortune of meeting."

---

"You mean you were lying here n-a-k-e-d with Sean Garrett's hands sliding all over your body?" Pam Delgado asked her an hour later.

"Yes. It was awful."

Pam laughed. "Who do you think you're fooling, ol' friend? Any woman in her right mind would love to have Sean give her a massage."

Pam and her brood of five had descended on Blair not long after Sean had left. Pam had assigned jobs to her four oldest children, and she and Blair were sitting at the table, talking over the clatter. The youngest Delgado, a boy a few months past his first birthday, was on his mother's lap, smearing himself with a soggy cookie.

"Pam, why didn't you tell me this man, who is my nearest neighbor and landlord, is a perverted—"

"He did something perverse?" Pam asked eagerly.

"No, he didn't do anything perverse," Blair said in vexation. "The whole thing was perverted. He took advantage of me," she cried. "I was mortified."

Pam's eyes softened a bit. "Well I can see how you might be upset. But you've got to admit being taken advantage of by Sean isn't exactly a fate worse than death.

I know women who'd—"

"Please," Blair said slightly irritated. "I'm not impressed by Sean Garrett as being anything other than a scheming womanizer."

"But he's not." Pam came to his defense quickly. "Blair, he's one of the pillars of the community. He's successful in business, he's on the city council, a member of the school board—"

"My God! You mean he's got children?"

"No, no. He's never been married. In addition, he's charming, and damned good to look at. Don't tell Joe, but I nearly ran the Volvo off in a ditch one day when I saw him working on a roof wearing nothing but a pair of shorts."

"Okay," Blair said, throwing up her hands. "He's absolutely wonderful and I'm weird for not realizing how lucky I am that he made a complete fool out of me."

Pam's smile drooped. Reaching across the table, she covered Blair's hand with her own. "I'm sorry. Knowing how . . . well, how headstrong you are, I can see how you'd be angry. But Blair, you have to admit that it's funny. Some of the things you said . . ." She couldn't hold back the laughter any longer and it bubbled out of her throat.

"Thanks a lot," Blair said, with a wry smile. "Traitor."

"Does his machismo make you nervous?" Pam said with obvious off-handedness. She crimped the curls on the baby's head. "I mean, you haven't really been involved with a man since Cole."

Blair looked away. "No, I haven't." Neither Pam nor anyone else knew the whole story of her relationship with Cole Slater, and no one ever would. If Pam harbored any curiosity about that segment of Blair's past, she was friend enough not to pry. For that Blair was grateful. Pam wasn't prying now. She was only providing a key should Blair want to open a



closed door. She didn't. "Sean Garrett just isn't my type, that's all."

Pam laughed. "If you're a woman, he's your type."

Blair studied her friend who had gained too much weight with each successive child until the accumulation had carried her far beyond being pleasantly plump. "If you're so enchanted with Sean Garrett, why didn't you go after him instead of Joe?" Blair teased.

Pam spread her arms wide. "Because Joe loves me just the way I am." Her eyes sparkled happily. Her skin, which she had sense enough to protect from too many sunny days on the beach, was clear and smooth. Her hair, piled up on top of her head in a careless knot, was a summation of her philosophy of life. She looked happy and totally fulfilled, and Blair knew a pang of envy.

"I know you think I've let myself go to pot," Pam said with characteristic honesty. "Don't think I don't look at you and get pea green with envy for your tiny figure. I do. But I'm happy, Blair. I wouldn't trade places with anyone, glamorous career or no glamorous career."

Blair was staring down at her hands, and Pam was watching helplessly as she read the heartache on her friend's enviably youthful face.

"I wouldn't blame you for not wanting to trade places with a thirty-year-old gypsy with banged up knees," Blair said forlornly.

"Your knees will heal and you'll be back dancing in no time."

"And if they don't heal? What then?"

"Then you'll do something else."

"I don't know anything else."

"Well, you'll learn something else. My Lord, Blair, you're beautiful and talented. I know you're not stupid enough to think that your life is going to end now that you're thirty and may not be able to dance anymore."

"The life I want will be over."

"How do you know what you want? You've never known any other life but dance. Something wonderful may be in store for you that you couldn't guess at. Do you think I thought, God let me be mugged that day in the park so I'd have to file a report with a cop named Delgado who had beautiful brown eyes and a wonderful laugh? That your knees are giving out may be the best thing that's ever happened to you."

Blair saw that arguing was useless, so she patted Pam's plump hand and said, "Maybe so," knowing full well that such was not the case.

---

The next day Blair avoided leaving the apartment. Pam had lent her the family's extra car indefinitely, but she really had nowhere to go. And Pam had lined the shelves and the refrigerator with food, as a housewarming gift. After Blair finished arranging the apartment to her satisfaction, she had spent the day as the doctor had advised her to spend most of her days—reclining with her legs elevated. She'd read, watched two old movies on the portable television set she'd brought with her, ate when she was hungry, and napped.

She heard Sean's battered truck lumber into the driveway between her apartment and his house, but she refused to even look out the window to catch a glimpse of him. Yet when he left in his Mercedes in the early evening, she couldn't help but wonder where he was going and with whom.

The second morning, she had awakened cross with herself for letting a man like Sean Garrett bother her. She restored her bed into a sofa, then walked into the kitchen and bent down to take the teakettle out of the lower cabinet. With no more movement than required to do these two small chores, she knew that her muscles



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If you are at least 10 lbs overweight.

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Before we make this remarkable program available through door to door and home distributors nationwide we want you, as well as a select group of other people, to test the program in the privacy of your own home and report back to us your test results.

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For complete program details, simply fill out the below form and return this notice within 21 days of today's publication date of this paper.

1. Approximately how long have you been trying to lose your excess weight? \_\_\_\_\_ yrs. \_\_\_\_\_ mos.
2. Your sex? ☐ female ☐ male
3. What is your present weight? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What do you want to weigh? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Your height? \_\_\_\_\_ ft. \_\_\_\_\_ in.
6. Approximately how many diet programs have you tried in the past? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Will you promise to give "The Ultimate Solution Diet Program" a fair and honest chance to work? ☐ Yes ☐ No
8. Will you follow "The Ultimate Solution Diet Program" for a minimum of two weeks? ☐ Yes ☐ No
9. Your Age? \_\_\_\_\_ yrs. \_\_\_\_\_ mos.
10. Is your frame size Sm \_\_\_\_\_, Med \_\_\_\_\_, or Lg \_\_\_\_\_?
11. Name, if you can, the last diet program that you tried? \_\_\_\_\_

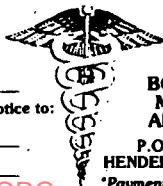
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had become soft and her joints stiff with just one day's inactivity.

Donning tights and a leotard and a pair of leg warmers, she went to the area in the large room near the windows. She'd purposefully left this space empty. Slowly and methodically she began to do her stretching exercises.

The telephone man arrived during the morning and installed the phone, and then Andrew, Pam's nine-year-old, appeared at the door.

"Aunt Blair, it's me, Andrew," a high, piping voice called. "Are you here?"

Andrew was Pam's oldest, and Pam had confided that he had a terrible crush on Blair.

"How did you get over here?" Blair asked.

"I walked," Andrew said proudly. "I know a shortcut. Mom sent me to tell you and Sean that she's having a party tonight. Well, it's not really a party, just some people coming over for steaks, ya know? Anyway you're supposed to come at eight o'clock. She said you could drive over together and save gas."

"I don't know," Blair said. "I'm awfully tired, and my legs have been hurting this morning. I'm sure I won't be missed."

Andrew turned to her, his eyes peering out from bangs in need of a trim. "You gotta come, Aunt Blair. Mom said she was giving the party to introduce you to people. She said Mandy and me could stay up until eight-thirty if we promised not to get in the way."

"Okay, Andrew. Tell your mom I'll be there."

"Super! See you tonight, Aunt Blair," Andrew called as he dashed out the door and bounded down the stairs in his excitement.

---

At a quarter to eight someone came up the stairs and knocked on the apartment door, and when Blair opened it, Sean was

standing there looking like a boy calling for his first date. His hair was well brushed and his cheeks shone with a recent shave. In his hand he carried a green paper-wrapped bouquet of daisies.

"This is a peace offering for what I did the other day. Will you forgive me?" he asked. Blair didn't answer, only stared at the flowers.

He stepped forward and, like someone in a trance, she moved aside and allowed him to enter the room. "Do you have a vase?"

"In . . . in the kitchen," she stammered, and went to the cabinet, where she found a slender clear glass vase, filled it with water, put the flowers in it, and came back to set it on the coffee table.

"Everything's shaping up," Sean said as his eyes surveyed the room. "I hope the bed is comfortable."

"Everything's fine."

"Good."

They stared at each other, then both looked away awkwardly. "I really am sorry," he said after a while. Only when Blair lifted her eyes to meet his gaze again did he continue. "I want you to understand that I'm not sorry it happened, or that I saw you that way, or that I touched you. I'm only sorry that you were embarrassed. It was a low trick I played on you, and you had every right to be angry."

She tried to banish the words about his seeing and touching her and concentrate on his deception and her anger. Why had he approached her this way? She had built up an arsenal of rebukes, of condemnations, but she couldn't use them now that he was so meekly apologetic. He had robbed her of the one weapon she had, anger. That was another low trick.

"Truce?" he asked when she remained silent, and Blair let out a sigh of resignation.

"Alright. Truce. I assume Pam coerced you into picking me up for the party."

"Coerce is hardly the word. Let's go."

If his fingers touched her bare back as they descended the stairs, she was certain it was only for courtesy's sake. He ushered her into the Mercedes and then launched into a description of the new room he was building onto the Delgados' house, and by the time they pulled up in front of it, she had relaxed her guard.

Pam greeted them with warm, effusive hugs. "The guest of honor is here," she called to the other guests, and Blair and Sean were swarmed by those wishing to be introduced to Pam's friend, whom many of them considered a celebrity. Blair gave Pam an I-don't-believe-this look when she realized her friend had colored her successful career to sound more grandiose than it was. She was aware, too, of Sean being greeted just as enthusiastically as she. The women simpered; the men spoke deferentially.

For the next few minutes Blair fielded the myriad questions hurled at her. Had she ever danced with Baryshnikov? Was a ten-year-old too young to start pointe? Did she adhere to any special diet to stay so thin? How much did she weigh anyway? Was it true she and Pam had once taken classes with Juliet Prowse? Would she even consider auditioning the players for the PTA benefit talent show?

Over that question, she stammered a polite promise to think about it. She almost jumped when large hands cupped her shoulders. "What would you like to drink?" She wasn't even aware that she tilted her head to the side to better feel the lips against her ear.

"White wine on the rocks," she whispered, trying unsuccessfully to listen to the lady from the PTA expounding on the value of their talent show.

Minutes later he was back with an icy glass of wine. The woman's chatter hadn't flagged for one moment.

"Blair, I think Pam's looking for you,"

Sean said quietly.

"Excuse me," Blair said graciously before letting him steer her away.

"Thanks," she said out of the corner of her mouth.

"That broad would bore a statue," he said, leaning down to whisper in her ear, as he led her out the back door and across the patio. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you what I'm building here."

He guided her through a skeletal wooden framework. "This is going to be a playroom?" Blair asked, her eyes scanning the concrete foundation.

"Yes. Over there will be a fireplace. Here, bookshelves and a built-in desk. I'm going to skylight it," Sean said, gazing up at the uncovered rafters overhead. "Theoretically, with all the kids in here, it will give Pam and Joe some privacy."

"I can imagine that their moments of privacy are few and far between."

He chuckled. "They couldn't be too hard to come by or there wouldn't be so many kids."

She joined his laughter as she looked up at him, and then suddenly, at the same time, their laughter broke off. The moment had become intensely intimate. Moonlight streamed in through the rafters overhead, casting his face in deep shadows as he looked down at her. She couldn't discern his expression, she only knew that he was studying her.

Sean couldn't ever remember wanting a woman as he wanted Blair. Since the first time his eyes had encountered hers, he had been singleminded in his daydreams. His body ached for hers. That made no damn sense at all. She wasn't even the type he usually preferred.

It was all wrong, and he knew it. Once, he had made grave errors in judgment and they had cost him everything. He had come away with a sounder insight into life's priorities and had managed to re-establish himself. He was now successful in

all but one area. So far he'd found no one he'd risk sharing his life with. Love was so often dependent on things going right. When something went wrong . . .

Blair Simpson had her own problems. She was undergoing a crisis that she would have to confront. He didn't need her in his life. That would only complicate things. Yet now, standing here in the moonlight, desire stampeded through his body.

The fierceness of his musings must have shown in the rugged planes of his face for she said his name tentatively. He shook his head to clear it, then drained the contents of his cocktail glass. "Yeah, I, uh, guess we ought to rejoin the others."

Blair had taken only a few sips of her wine. Her fingers were stiff with cold. She had clenched them around the glass as though it were her last handhold on sanity. Sean stepped aside and ushered her back across the patio.

"Would you like some coffee?" he asked. Had he said, "Would you like to make love?" it couldn't have sounded more like an invitation to intimacy.

*Tell him you can get your own coffee,* Blair, her mind screamed. Instead her lips formed the words, "Yes, please. No sugar, a drop of cream." He backed away slowly.

Dazed, Blair drifted to a chair and sat down. She pretended to listen when one of the ladies started in on how deplorable the dance school in town was, but her mind was in a turmoil.

"That's a terrific idea," Pam exclaimed, jolting Blair out of her reverie. "What do you think, Blair?"

"Uh, I . . ." she stuttered. Taking the saucer Sean was offering her, she realized that she had been the focal point of the unheard conversation going on around her. "I don't know," she said lamely. *What had they been talking about?*

Pam enlightened her. "The dance school here is terrible. I've wanted to get

Mandy started on ballet, but didn't think I'd get my money's worth. And as you know, if a child isn't taught properly from the first, there can be irreparable damage done to her muscles. Do you think you'd like to teach some classes while you're here?"

"Well—"

"I know I would love to take ballet," one of the ladies chimed in. "Nothing strenuous, you understand, just stretching exercises to shave off some lumps." Several others concurred enthusiastically.

"You want me to teach ballet classes?" Blair asked, finally grasping the drift of the conversation.

"Yes! Why not?"

Blair laughed uncomfortably. "Well for one thing, I'm not a teacher."

"But you're a dancer. The best I've ever seen. Now don't be modest," Pam rushed on. "You love to dance, and since you can't professionally for a while, this might be the next best thing." The others nodded in agreement.

"Would it hurt your legs?"

Blair turned to the quiet voice speaking close to her ear and looked into Sean's eyes. "I don't think so. The doctor said that a minimum of regular exercise would help them retain their strength."

"Then it's all set!" Pam said, beaming.

"Wait, wait, Pam. One has to have a studio."

"You need a wooden floor, a large room?" Sean inquired.

Blair turned back to Sean. "Yes."

"I bought an old school gymnasium several months ago with the idea of one day converting it into a health club. It has such a room. You could use that. I'll do whatever reconstruction needs to be done."

"Terrific!" Pam clapped her hands.

"But I don't want to go into business," Blair protested.

"I won't charge you rent for the building and you won't charge your students.



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She gnawed her bottom lip. If living here less than a week had taught her one thing it was that time didn't move as fast in Tidelands as it did in the city. She was going to be here for six long months. If she didn't do something, she'd likely go mad.

"I could teach basic ballet to students no older than twelve," she said slowly. "For you women I suppose I could conduct exercise classes, but I won't be able to do any strenuous calisthenics."

"We could do those on our own," one of the woman contributed.

Pam took both of Blair's hands. "Then you'll say yes? Please, Blair. It'll be good for you, too. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't have suggested it."

Blair's eyes swept up to Sean. He was staring at her in that stirring way, but he neither encouraged or discouraged her compliance. She looked back at Pam, shrugged, and said, "As you said, why not? As long as you understand that it's only temporary. Only for as long as I'm here."

---

The next week sped by. Sean divided his time between the house he was working on, the addition to the Delgados' house, and the dance studio. He had contracted specialists in each field to do the work required, but in the afternoons he checked on them to make sure they did everything according to his high standards. When Blair wasn't able to accompany him, he reported the progress to her.

These progress reports were usually given over dinner either at his house or in her apartment or in one of the fine restaurants lining the beach. If Blair felt uneasy about the amount of time they were spending together, she justified it by telling herself it was for the sake of business.

When Pam had first told her about Sean, she had envisioned a near illiterate

who made his living doing handiwork with a saw and hammer. Meeting him had altered that opinion considerably. And seeing the quality of the restoration on his house and the studio had elevated her assessment of his career. But all the while she was enjoying his entertaining company, she searched for a flaw, something in him that repulsed her, some secret sin for which he could be despised. There was none. In every aspect, he was the most attractive man she had ever met. His very appeal shook the foundations on which her life was built. His smile made her want to flee, but at the same time she longed to bask in its golden warmth.

One night, as they drank their coffee, he watched her in silence for a moment, then asked softly. "When did you start dancing?"

"When I was four."

"Four!"

She laughed. "That was when my mother enrolled me in my first ballet class, and I've danced ever since. It's more than a career. It's a way of life that no one except another dancer can understand. We all eat, sleep, and breathe dance. We go without lodging and food to pay for classes. When we're not working in a show, we wait tables, do anything to support ourselves. But we never sacrifice our classes. If someone's broke, he moves in with someone else until better times come along. I guess that's why we're called gypsies. We carry our livelihoods around in canvas bags—smelly leotards, mended tights, worn out shoes, leg warmers, ointments."

Almost too casually he asked, "In all this moving in and out with people, was there ever anyone you lived with for an extended period of time?"

A year—would he consider that an extended period of time? A heartbreaking year, but one with rare moments of joy and sharing that made it worthwhile. She

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"I used to look at least ten years older, unattractive, but worst of all, any day I expected a heart attack, stroke or diabetes, and decided that this was too serious a problem to expect my family to have to live with. The expense and care would have wiped us all out financially, even if I didn't die from all these diseases."

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that he was asking—Had she ever  
with a man? Had there been a man in  
? "Yes." She answered him truth-  
I lived with a man named Cole Sla-  
for a while. That was several years

and?" he asked when she didn't ex-  
on that.

And since then I've lived alone."  
I see."

He didn't, but she wasn't going to en-  
lighten him.

---

Since the disastrous massage, Sean  
made no sexual innuendoes, initiated no  
romantic scenes. Each night as they part-  
ed company, he kissed her lightly on the  
cheek with the detachment of a fond rela-  
tive. Blair told herself she was glad of  
that, but she wondered why she poured  
body and soul into her mild workouts as  
though trying to rid herself of a persistent  
parasite; why there was inside her a rest-  
lessness that couldn't quite be defined.

As promised, Sean had the studio ready  
in time for classes to open. The night be-  
fore the big day, he took Blair for one last  
inspection tour. The mirrors were in-  
stalled. The floor had been sanded and  
treated; the barre, ordered from the city,  
had been positioned along the wall ac-  
cording to her specifications.

"Sean this is . . . too much. I wanted  
something livable, but this is deluxe. I've  
never worked in a studio this nice in Man-  
hattan."

"As I told you before, it's an invest-  
ment." He shrugged. "I'm only selfishly  
planning for the future."

She didn't believe him, but didn't argue  
with him. If his goal had been to instill her  
with enthusiasm for her new project, he  
had succeeded. She couldn't wait until the  
next morning for her first class.

But by the time the class was over, her  
enthusiasm had drastically altered. She  
had had to cope with twenty-five excited

little girls and twenty-five obnoxious  
mothers. "You gotta be kiddin'," she said  
to Pam as she collapsed into the comfort-  
able chair in the office, silently thanking  
Sean for installing it there.

Pam laughed as she stationed Mandy in  
front of her to rebraid her hair. "Wait until  
you get thirty-five out-of-shape house-  
wives who want a body like yours within  
two or three weeks. They'll dance their  
pounding hearts out then go home to their  
secret cache of M&Ms."

Indeed Blair learned a lot within the  
next couple of weeks: grown women had  
to be reminded that they couldn't gossip  
and do strenuous exercises at the same  
time, children should never dance with  
bubble gum in their mouths lest they go  
home with it enmeshed in their hair; wom-  
en can get hostile when told not to bring  
cups of coffee onto the dance floor please.

Yet each night over their dinner, which  
she and Sean seemed to have a silent  
agreement to share together, she re-  
counted these events with her eyes shining  
brightly and her gestures animated. She  
didn't realize how happy she looked, how  
seldom she talked about her knees, which  
gave her very little trouble if she was care-  
ful in demonstrating steps. When she fell  
into her sofa bed at night, she slept the  
sleep of the just, exhausted, but always  
eager to get up and face the challenges of  
the next day.

As she was locking the door after her  
last class late one Friday afternoon, Sean  
was waiting for her in his Mercedes.

"Why are you so late?" he called out the  
car window. "Everyone left a long time  
ago."

Blair was sure everyone leaving had  
taken note that he was waiting for her, too.  
"I worked out a while and then show-  
ered."

"Do you like champagne?"

"Only when chilled to perfection," she  
yelled back.

"Then you're in luck. It's been on ice all day." He climbed out of his car, detoured her from the borrowed car she was still driving, and propelled her to the passenger side of his Mercedes. "Pam said she'd have Joe bring her by and drive the car back to your apartment. Tonight, we're celebrating with a picnic dinner on the beach."

"To what do I owe this dubious honor?"

"To the fact that you're reasonably sane after two weeks of dance classes with the ladies and girls of Tidelands," he teased, starting the motor and steering out of the parking lot.

"That does call for a celebration, but do you mind your date being dressed like this?" She had slipped on a clean leotard and wrapped a denim skirt around her waist when she'd finished her shower. Her hair was still damp, parted down the middle and left to dry naturally, which meant perfectly straight.

He scanned her out of the corner of his eye. "I guess you'll do." When she looked at him with murder in her eyes, he laughed. "You know I always think you look beautiful." Reaching across the interior of the car, he slipped his hand under her skirt and lay it on her knee. The shock that missed through both of them went straight to their hearts.

"How are your legs?" he asked softly.

"Fine," she said in a gravelly voice, then cleared her throat. "I talked to the doctor yesterday. He said to continue doing what I'm doing. He wants to see me in a month."

Sean pulled into the driveway of a house with a beach front. It was Victorian, with a surrounding veranda, cupolas in each corner of the front on the upper story, and filigreed woodwork.

"This is one of the houses I restored for a client. They own a stretch of the beach, but I've been given permission to use it when they're not here. I happen to know

they're in Europe."

The sunset was painting the entire atmosphere indigo. An ocean breeze cooled her cheeks as she opened the car door and stepped out. Sean took a blanket, a picnic basket, and a cooler out of the backseat. "Can you carry the blanket and basket? This thing's heavy," he said in reference to the cooler.

They made their way around the house and took the path through tall grass to the beach. Sean spread the blanket and Blair collapsed on it, stretching her legs out in front of her.

"Ah, Mother Nature, there's nothing like her." Sean sighed. He whipped his T-shirt over his head and hopped on alternate feet until he rid himself of his running shoes. Then, to Blair's utter dismay, he unsnapped his shorts and they dropped to his ankles rendering him totally naked.

Paralyzed where she sat, she watched his hand extend down to her. "Join me?"

She shook her head, dumbfounded. He didn't insist. Instead he turned and headed toward the surf, then walked into the sparkling water with the arrogant swagger of a nautical god.

When he came out, she averted her head and murmured inconsequentially about the spectacular sunset. His breathing was rough from exertion, hers nonetheless so. But hers became easier as she saw out of her peripheral vision that he was stepping into his shorts. She exhaled gratefully when she heard the top fastener snapping closed.

"Whew," he said, rubbing his hands through his hair. "That was great. Now I'm hungry. How about you? We have lobster salad, devilled eggs, French bread, and strawberry tarts. I had the chef at The Lighthouse pack the basket for me."

Adroitly, he popped the cork out of the champagne bottle. Taking two stemmed glasses out of the basket, he poured each

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We apologize for the delay in the last few issues, which was due to a change in issue frequency. Starting with the May/June/July, 1988 issue, *World's Greatest Love Stories* and *5 Great Romances* will be published five times a year instead of six, on the following schedule:

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of them a generous amount, held his glass aloft, and clinked it against hers. "To the most graceful, most beautiful, most . . . sexiest dancing teacher I've ever known."

Blair laughed, but acknowledged the compliments with a regal nod of her head. They both sipped and sighed in delight at the cold pleasure of the wine. Then, leaning toward her, he settled his lips against hers. "Congratulations on a job well done."

"Thank you."

The kiss was devoid of passion, but rife with tenderness.

After they'd eaten, she rolled her head to the side to look at him. "That was delicious. Thank you. It's wonderful here."

"You're wonderful," he said thickly. "You look wonderful. Sound wonderful. Taste wonderful." The inches between them lessened until his mouth fastened onto hers again in a telling kiss.

"I've wanted to do that every time I was with you these past weeks. God it's been hell."

"Why didn't you?"

"You weren't ready."

"Do you think I'm ready now?"

"If you're not, have pity. I'm dying for you."

He kissed her again and the hand that trailed down her side brought a shiver of anticipation over her entire body. He pulled her over until she sat between his raised knees, cradled against his chest. He draped his discarded T-shirt over her shoulders and slid his hands beneath her arms to meet over her stomach.

"Do you know that my body hasn't given me a minute's peace since I first saw you?" he asked hoarsely.

Where her courage came from, where her carefully maintained caution fled to she never knew. At this point in time, she didn't want to be reminded of who she was, or who he was, or the opposing directions of their lives. "I think so," she

replied, tasting his salty skin as she kissed him ever so softly on the cheek.

"Blair, sweet one, I want to make love to you, but not here. Come on."

He let her go and began gathering the remnants of their picnic with quick movements. She could barely keep up with him as he stalked to the car. The wind whipped his hair, the cool evening chilled his torso, but he was impervious.

In the car, Blair sat curled next to him, disdaining the passenger side. Her head lay on his shoulder, her hand on his thigh.

Finally he swung the car into the driveway. The sight that greeted them as he screeched to a stop was totally unexpected and unwanted. Two cars with several passengers each were parked in front of the stairs leading to Blair's apartment. Bodies of each sex were draped in varying poses on the cars. A few were perched on the stairs and banister. Chatter and laughter punctuated the night air. It looked like a band of gypsies had camped on her doorstep.

And that's exactly what had happened.

---

Sean's curse seared the roof of the car. "What the hell is this?"

Blair shook off her momentary stunned surprise and scrambled for her own side of the car. "Friends of mine," she said breathlessly, and retreating from his seething eyes, shoved open her door and shouted uproarious greetings that were in direct contrast to her mood.

She was lifted into an adagio hold over one of the young men's heads, then swung from one friend to another to receive a hearty hug. Altogether there must have been twelve to fifteen friends who had driven out to see her, though she never got an accurate head count as they never stood still long enough.

"Where have you been?"

"We've been waiting for hours."

"Is that sand on your toes?"

"Hope we didn't interrupt anything."

Questions and quips were fired at Blair with the rapidity of machine-gun fire. "Uh, this is Sean Garrett, my friend."

Sean, with a tight, tense expression on his face, leaned with deceptive nonchalance against the Mercedes. A dozen or so pairs of eyes were directed at him and greetings were called. He responded with a less than enthusiastic "Hello."

When all had filed into her apartment with exclamations of approval, she glanced over her shoulder to see that Sean hadn't followed. "Sean, please come on up," she called.

"I wouldn't want to intrude." Why was his voice so chill, when moments ago he was virtually burning with desire?

"You won't be. Please."

"Okay."

"So what's it like living out here in the boonies?" someone asked over the blare of the stereo which someone else had wasted no time in tuning to an acid rock station.

"It's all right," Blair shouted back, smiling. Where was Sean? Oh, over there glaring derisively at the guy with the punk haircut, tank-top, and red bloomer pants. He's really a terrific dancer, Blair wanted to inform Sean. "I'm teaching class here."

"Oh my God!" one of the girls cried, placing her palms flat against her overrouged cheeks. "She's turned into a regular schoolmarm." Everyone collapsed in laughter. Blair could feel the smile she had pasted on her face begin to crack.

For the next half hour her dancer friends related current happenings to her and reminisced over shared past experiences. Blair wondered why she no longer felt like one of the insiders. This group that she had been such an integral part of now seemed incredibly young and immature and shallow. They were self-centered to a fault, paranoid, and boring. They talked of one thing only—dance. Sean was ig-

nored and did his best to remain so.

When at last someone reminded everyone else that they needed to start driving back to the city, the party began to break up. They drove out of the driveway trailing blasts of the automobile horns and ribald suggestions that she and Sean could pick up their own party where they left off.

When Blair turned away from the door, she saw that at some undetermined point in time Sean had left, too. That was fitting. She'd never felt more alone in her life. For a few minutes, she pointlessly roamed the apartment, without conscious thought, without mission, without purpose. Just as her life was.

She had no one. She had nothing. This pseudolife she had been building in Tidelands was just that—a sham. She wasn't a part of life here. Never could be. She had only one thing. Only one thing in her life remained constant.

Suddenly filled with resolve, she yanked up her purse and flew out of the apartment and down the stairs. The car had been returned as Pam had promised Sean. Blair pumped it to life and raced out the driveway and to the studio.

There, she pulled on a pair of tights she kept handy in a drawer and put on her toe shoes. Whisking off her skirt, she went to the barre and did a preliminary warm-up. Only the light in the office fanned across the vast expanse of empty floor.

Her body was now bathed with a film of perspiration. She selected a record and put it on the turntable. Assuming a position in front of the mirrored wall, she began to move to the haunting strains of the music. At first the tempo was slow and measured, then it gradually increased.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" a voice boomed out of the darkness.

Blair didn't stop, nor did her well-practiced movements falter. Without an apology or qualification, she answered Sean's

angry question. "What I was born to do." Sean, alarmed, stamped to the record player and lifted the arm. The resultant silence was almost deafening.

Blair wound down like the ballerina on a music box, until she came to a complete stop. For a few moments she stood, shoulders slumped, head bowed, abjectly despairing. When she raised her head, Sean saw her tears streaming down her face.

"Don't stop me," she begged, all vestiges of pride stripped from her. "I must dance. Now. This moment. Please."

"You'll hurt yourself."

She folded her arms over her stomach and gripped hard. "I'm hurting now," she cried.

Sean looked at her with mixed feelings. He thought she had never looked so beautiful. The eyes that rained tears were those of a disillusioned child, and he felt a surge of pity for her. She was trying so desperately to disregard an undeniable fact.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Put the needle at the beginning of the third selection."

The appeal so soulfully spoken couldn't be denied. "All right," he heard himself say.

The haunting strains of Rachmaninoff filled the room and she glided around him, her personality changed into the character she was portraying. She embodied a woman in love—sensuous, provocative, dancing for her lover.

As the music built to its crescendo, she whirled toward him. "Kneel down on one knee," she said on a heaving breath and as the music ended she did a daring back bend over his right shoulder, her toes resting high on his thigh. Finale.

Finally Blair stirred and miraculously lifted herself off his shoulder. His hand went to her stomach to give her better leverage. She stood, keeping her back to him. From his kneeling position on the

floor, he slowly turned her toward him.

Her face was wet with tears, but they were no longer tears of pain, but of joy.

"You're beautiful." His hands skimmed her body to reassure him that she was real flesh and blood and not some fairy creature sent from heaven to enchant him.

"Sean," she cried, though no sound was emitted. He cradled her and kissed her with wild hunger.

When he came up for air, he rasped, "Let's get out of here," and within minutes they were wheeling away from the studio in his car. There was no possibility of their going into Blair's apartment. The "party" that had occurred there was still too recent, and Sean didn't want her wounds to reopen.

He carried her into his house, and when he set her down in the large bedroom, she looked up at him shyly, saying, "I need a shower."

He grinned sweetly. "So do I."

After they'd showered, their arms entwined around each other the entire time, Sean broke the embrace and cut off the water. He helped her out of the shower, wrapped her in a towel, then blotted her dry. Haphazardly he dried himself.

Scooping her in his arms, he carried her into the moonlit room, flung the covers of the bed back, and settled her on the cool sheets before following with his own body. He turned on his side to face her, and his lips fused with hers. "Blair, Blair, God you're wonderful."

She felt that he was drawing her very soul into himself and she let it go gladly. "Love me, Sean."

"I am," he whispered as he explored all the secrets of her body. "I'm loving all of you. Feel me loving you."

The blissful torture went on and on until she was held in a fine sensual net from which there was no escape. Her body surrendered complete control to him. When she clung to him with silent sobbing and

called his name plaintively, when her body undulated with the need to be fulfilled, he rolled her to her back.

He cautioned himself to be gentle, as he knew she'd not been with anyone since coming into his life. He was watching her face, so he saw her teeth clamp down over her bottom lip.

"Blair." Her name was an astonished, horrified exclamation. "This isn't possible."

Her eyes opened. "Don't stop."

"But—"

"Please, Sean, if you love me at all."

He searched her face, still incredulous, but eternally tender with emotion. "God, yes, I love you. Didn't you know that's what this was about?"

The hardest thing he had ever had to do in his life was curb his own raging passions, but he loved her too well to frighten or hurt her. He remained still until he felt her muscles relax and her tension ebb; then he kissed her mouth softly. Her eyes fluttered open. "Am I hurting you?"

She shook her head. "No." She mouthed the word rather than spoke it. The heady thought of what was happening between them, the wonder and awe of it, left her too weak to speak.

"You're sure?" She nodded. "Why didn't you tell me, Blair?"

"Do you really want to talk about it now?" she asked unevenly.

She felt his stomach shake with silent laughter. "I'd rather bring this to a mutually satisfying conclusion." He ducked his head to plant a solid kiss at the base of her throat.

Her back arched off the bed. "Do you think you can?"

"We can. Together."

---

"I didn't think that could happen the first time," Blair said, her lips barely moving over the warm skin of his shoulder.

"It's rare I'm sure." His index finger was detailing the fragility of her collarbone. "And only then if the man is lucky enough to initiate a sexpot like you."

"Ah, Sean Garrett, you've turned me into a depraved human being in one evening. Kiss me," she implored, pulling him down to her mouth.

He pulled back and asked huskily, "Blair, who was Cole?"

Her head thumped back onto the pillow and she stared up at him wide-eyed. He had switched on the bedside lamp and now it shed a soft light onto their flushed bodies. At his question, her face paled significantly.

"I told you he was a man I lived with for a while." Her eyes closed against a painful memory.

Suddenly remorseful that he had taken that shining animation his lovemaking had produced from her face, he said. "Don't tell me more if it's painful."

"No," she said. "I want you to know." She took his hand. "Cole arrived in New York after I had been there for a few years. He was fresh out of sophomore year in college. His coming to New York was really a rebellious move against his father, who was an athletic coach at his hometown high school. Coach Slater couldn't imagine anything worse than having a son who was a ballet dancer, even though Cole was as athletic as any of the football players on his father's team."

She sighed, took Sean's large hand, and laid it on her stomach. "Cole virtually starved until he found a waiter's job to support his dance classes. I liked him, felt sorry for him, and asked him to share my apartment until he could get established.

"We became increasingly fond of each other. Affectionate. Everyone began to consider us 'a couple.' He thrilled to calling home and telling his father that he was living with a woman. You see, the one thing Cole wanted to prove to his father

was that, despite the fact that he was a dancer, he was also a man."

"And?" he encouraged when she became quiet.

"And in the year and a half we lived together, he was never able to prove it."

She seemed to be shrinking away from him, and Sean drew her close and held her tight as though to keep her from diminishing into nothingness. "What happened?" he asked.

"One day Cole decided that he couldn't live with that kind of conflict in his life and threw himself in front of a subway train."

"Dammit," Sean sighed and squeezed his eyes closed. "You loved him?" he asked after a long silence.

"Yes, though I know now it wasn't a romantic kind of love. I think I pitied him and regretted the misunderstanding between him and his parents. To some degree I suffered that same kind of misunderstanding all my life and could relate to it. He needed me to elevate his self-image. And I needed him to tell me how good I was. Not a very sound basis for any relationship. I never took the chance of loving anyone else again. Dancing was the only love in my life."

Sean's heart did a flip-flop. "Was?"

She looked up at him. "Don't rush me. Only know that until an hour ago, I thought the ultimate feeling came from dancing as perfectly as I was capable. Now I know there are other levels of emotion."

"I'm glad I was able to turn you on to them," he said with a solemnity that was belied by the glint in his eyes.

She tilted her head and eyed him suspiciously. "You've never told me how you became so adept in the art of lovemaking. Was there someone in your past who tutored you?"

His smile remained, but his eyes clouded momentarily. "At one time I thought

there might be a Mrs. Sean Garrett, but things didn't work out."

"Oh." She wished she hadn't brought up the subject. Maybe she was better off not knowing. She might never measure up to that unknown identity.

He smoothed the wrinkle out of her forehead. "Blair, don't read anything tragic into that statement. I don't carry a torch. I rarely think of her, and then with supreme indifference. And someday I may tell you the whole boring story, but not now. Not while you're lying beside me naked and gorgeous."

"You're gorgeous, too," she said. And . . . She averted her eyes.

"What?" he asked, pulling her down beside him again.

"You were there when I needed you. Thank you." Her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

He dabbed at her moist eyes. "Don't thank me," he said in an urgent whisper. "You are just what I needed, too."

---

The week that followed was idyllic—until Blair received a call from Barney, her agent, offering her an audition for the new Joel Gray musical, and Sean's blatant disappointment when she accepted started an ugly fight between them that ended with him slamming out of her apartment on Monday morning.

When Sean arrived at the Delgados' a few hours later to work on their room addition, his face dark, his eyes stormy, Pam had bravely asked him if Blair had gone to the city to the audition. He snarled an affirmative, then went on in the most blasphemous terms Pam had ever heard come out of his mouth about what he thought of Barney, the audition, and a woman who was too stubbornly obsessed to know what was good for her. "She could end up a cripple," he roared.

Now, late in the afternoon, Pam answered the tapping knock on the front



door to see her best friend standing on the threshold, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"Is Sean here? I don't want him to see me like this, but I have to talk to you."

"He's in the back, but come on in," Pam said quickly. She hustled Blair through the door and then down the narrow hallway to her room. She closed the door behind them and sank onto the bed beside Blair, who bent almost double and sobbing.

"I didn't make it." Blair said in a barely discernible croak.

Pam masked her sigh of relief. If Blair were ever to dance professionally again, she had to give her body time to regenerate.

"Did your knees give out?"

Blair shook her head. "No, Pam, that's just it. I warmed up well, I danced better than I ever have. Ever. The choreographer and the producer narrowed it down from about fifty to eight of us. I knew I had made it. I couldn't miss. I had more experience, more credits. I danced flawlessly. But I was a good five years older than the oldest of the others. When the choreographer named the five who made it, I wasn't among them."

"Oh, Blair, darling, you know that doesn't mean anything. You've been x-ed from auditions dozens of times. There'll be others."

Blair laughed ruefully. "I wish I could believe that, but I don't. I had to make this one to survive. Don't ask me how I know that, I just do." She squeezed Pam's hands hard. "I danced so well, Pam. I did."

"I hope you didn't hurt yourself," Pam said worriedly. "Do your legs hurt?"

Blair shrugged. "A little. No more than usual."

Pam broached the next subject tentatively. "Sean was worried sick about you. He was pawing the ground like a bull, but he was scared silly you'd wind up in the hospital."

Blair's lips began to tremble. "When I could have used his encouragement the most, he yelled at me. So much for developing relationships. I guess I'll go down as another notch on his belt."

"Don't say such a stupid thing. It makes me angry. For once will you open your eyes?" Pam shouted. Blair looked up in amazement. She'd never, in all the years they'd been friends, heard such censure in her friend's voice. "The guy's crazy in love with you. He was out of his mind with worry for you, not if you'd make the damned audition, but if you'd survive it. He was so upset he called George Silverton just to—"

"George Silverton? *The producer of the show?*" Blair came flying off the bed. "And how does Sean Garrett know George Silverton?"

Pam moistened her lips nervously. "He . . . he, uh, did a house for him last year. They became fairly good buddies, I think, and—"

"Never mind," Blair said, dashing for the door. She barreled down the hall, Pam rapidly stumbling after her.

"I know what he did," she shouted over her shoulder. Then she marched across the patio and stepped through the framework of the new room.

Sean was hammering nails into a two-by-four. Andrew, who was assisting his idol, looked up with a broad grin that dissipated when he saw that his first true love was bristling with fury.

"I want to talk to you," Blair announced in a tightly controlled voice.

"Not now, I'm busy," Sean said laconically.

"Now!" she shouted, stamping her foot.

Sean's brows lowered dangerously over the glittering eyes. "I'm busy," he repeated in biting tones. "Besides that I don't think this is the time or place for us to air our differences."

"I don't give a damn what you think or who hears us."

"Well, I do." Before she knew what he was about, he dropped the hammer with a crash, and plowed toward her, tossing her over his lowered shoulder and marching her into Pam's room, where he flung her down on the bed and slammed the door, sealing them alone in the room.

She catapulted off the bed and faced him, her hands grinding into her hips. "I should have known you'd have the instincts of a barbarian. They were bound to surface sooner or later," she cried.

"I didn't create a scene, you did," he shouted. "I don't apologize for hauling you around like a sack of flour because you have no more sensitivity than one. Even if you didn't mind Pam hearing what we're about to discuss, you should care that Andrew would. He has a worshipful attitude toward you that I frankly think is misplaced."

"Don't lecture me on my behavior," she spat. "I only want to know one thing. Did you or did you not call George Silverton?"

"Yes, I did." His inflection was calm.

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes. We play tennis when he comes out for a weekend."

His succinct, honest answers perversely infuriated her further. "Did you sabotage my chances of getting cast in that show? Did you tell him he'd be risking my falling down during a performance? That I was a handicapped dancer? Or was it something just between you guys? That I was your current bed partner and you weren't quite ready for me to go back to work?"

The words that tumbled out of Sean's mouth as he raked a hand through his hair would only be found on the walls of the vilest public restrooms. He stood in an arrogant pose while he eyed her with mingled amazement and disgust.

"You really think that?" he asked final-

ly, when she was beginning to avoid the blue heat of his eyes. "After the past few days we've spent together, you can honestly think that I'd do something like that? No, Blair, I hate to disappoint you, but your name was never mentioned. I called George, who, yes, is a friend of mine. I knew he was producing that show. I asked him about it. Asked him about the type of show it was, trying to learn just how rigorous it would be for you. That's all. Period."

"Well, I don't believe it," she said, to his surprise. "I danced too well. I was great. Something kept me from being selected, and it had nothing to do with my performance at that audition."

"And it had nothing to do with me. Why would I do something like that to you?" His voice contained the genuine bafflement he felt. "And what the hell happened to your hair?"

Stunned momentarily by the question asked so out of context, she reached up to pat her hair, as though to acquaint herself with what could be wrong with it. "I . . . I frizzed it."

"You mean you did that on purpose?" he asked tactlessly.

Her chin went up defensively. "It looks good from the stage this way. It makes me look younger. And I don't need to listen to this," she said, stamping past him on her way to the door.

He caught her arm and whirled her around to face him. "Yes, you do," he said. "You've needed someone to tell it to you like it is for a long time. You, Blair Simpson, are the most self-centered person I've ever known. Your selfishness is so much a part of you that you don't even see it. Do you think you're the only person in the world who's ever had a setback? You've had twelve successful years of a dancing career."

"It's not enough."

"It'll never be enough. But there are

other levels of success and only some of them relate to notoriety and affluence. Others have to do with being a warm, caring, loving human being. And as that, Miss Simpson, you're a miserable failure."

The words were like a slap in the face. "Shut up!"

"No, you shut up and listen to me. No amount of success is ever going to make you happy, because you'll never trust it not to fly out the window. You'll still crave acceptance. And it won't matter a damn who else accepts you, because you'll never be able to accept yourself. That's what's wrong with you, Blair. You don't like yourself."

He was too close to the truth. "How dare you lecture me about something you know nothing about. You sit out here in your cushy little nest and hand down sermons on success. From where I sit, it looks like everything you've ever touched turned to gold. Tell me, King Midas, when you ever knew a day of disappointment and rejection."

"Eight years ago when I went bankrupt and lost everything."

The silence was palpable. Sean's unleashed tension rolled over Blair in waves and choked off her oxygen. She walked to the bed and dropped down. He went to the window, staring out with his back to her.

"I was thirty years old, building crappy houses and condos right and left. Buying up land for more. Then everything went wrong—unwise investments, a glutted market, high lending rates, tight money. No one bought the houses or condos. Banks called in their loans. I was down to the socks I stood in. I filed chapter eleven."

"Country club friends and investors forgot my telephone number and wished they could forget my name. It makes people nervous to be around someone who's going under for the third time, as though they'll catch the contagious disease he's

carrying. Anyway I wasn't much fun to be around anymore. I had to sell my sailboat, my XKE, my six horses, my tennis racket and golf clubs." He laughed. "I'm not joking. It got that bad."

"Through the courts I was able to liquidify assets and pay back the debts. Slowly. Very slowly. But most creditors got back ninety cents on the dollar. I moved out here and started over. Worked as a carpenter. Found I liked it."

"I scraped up enough money to buy my house and worked on it on the week-ends. Then I bought another and sold it, using my house as an example of what could be done with an old house like that. I think you can piece together the rest. I was very lucky. I got a second chance and managed not to blow it."

He turned to look at her now. "You were curious about the woman I planned to marry. She took a walk when the going got rough, panicked at the thought of being chained to a husband who couldn't keep up his country club dues, not to mention her Bonwit's charge account."

"She just left?"

"Yes, and at the time I was glad to see her go. That was just one less responsibility I had to cope with. But I was mad as hell that she kept the diamond engagement ring. I was planning on selling it." A trace of humor lit his blue eyes.

He came to sit beside her on the bed. Taking her hand, he lay it in the palm of one of his and marveled over its slender fingers and the faint blue veins threading the back of it. "If one lives to middle age, Blair, one has to go through upheavals. Women lose their husbands and have to enter the job market for the first time; men get laid off from a factory job they've had for thirty years and have to find other work. I didn't plan on ever being happy again, yet I'm happier now than I've ever been. This life I'm leading now was totally unpredictable. It just fell out of the blue

into my lap like a gift. Except my life lacks something vital," he said softly. He lifted the mass of hair covering her ear.

"What vital something would that be?"

His mouth maneuvered its way over her cheek to ghost against her lips as he spoke. "A woman to love me. To share my life. To make laughter and love with. Blair, you've been hurt today. If I could, I would have spared you that, but maybe it's better that this happened."

It was hard to think while his hand was playing with the buttons on her blouse, but his conciliatory tone jiggled a nerve that wouldn't let her relax completely. "Why better?" she asked.

"Because now you know you're better off accepting your life here. Now you can forget about ever going back."

The hand plucking at the buttons on her blouse was caught by hers and removed.

"I don't know anything of the sort, Sean. And I'm not forgetting about anything, especially my career. You've been telling me for the last half-hour how wonderful and rare second chances are. I've got to go back. As soon as I contact Barney—"

"I don't believe this," Sean bellowed. "I've been talking about a second chance with another life, not the same one. Don't be obtuse, Blair. You're only hearing what you want to hear."

"The story you've just told me applies to your life, Sean, not mine."

"They could be one and the same." The simple clarity with which he spoke panicked her more than his earlier forcefulness had done.

"But they're not. Not now, not until—"

"Not until you're too crippled to dance anymore? Maybe even to walk?" He was shouting now.

He stood and strode to the door, swung it open. "Well, forget that, doll. Forget hobbling back to me. I won't want you by the time you're too battered and beaten to

be valuable to anyone else."

The parting words flung over his retreating shoulder were repeated in her head like a satanic chant and held sleep at bay. Blair tossed on her sofa bed, uncomfortable and lonely after the nights Sean had slept cradled against her. His breath had warmed her ear. His hands. . . .

Sometime during the night she decided to move back to the city. She belonged where she could be on hand should anything break. Barney would be ecstatic.

She didn't want to think about the throbbing pain in both her knees. She had used heating pads and ice packs alternately to no avail. She had taken three aspirins together, then two hours later had been driven to take three more. She had danced full force at the audition, and now she was paying for it. Sean would probably be pleased to know that she was feeling battered and beaten. "Damn!" She cursed the tears that welled in her eyes. Why was she crying over him more than she was her injured knees? His rebuke had been much harder to take than the rejection at the audition. Why?

There was only one answer and she wasn't ready to acknowledge it.

In the morning, the telephone jangled loudly and jarred her out of sleep. Her clock indicated a few minutes past ten. She moaned and buried her face in the pillow. "Hold your horses," she grumbled as she pulled the receiver to her ear.

"Blair!"

The voice she wanted most to hear. The voice that had haunted her all night was speaking to her, but . . .

"Blair?" he shouted impatiently. "Is Pam with you?"

Befuddled, she looked around the room. "No, why? She—"

"Have you seen her? Do you know where she might be?" he demanded rude-

ly.

"I . . ." She wasn't surprised that he was still angry, but this wasn't like him to call and be deliberately rude. "Sean, is something wrong?"

"Andrew's had an accident. I was working on their roof. He climbed a ladder to bring me a sack of nails. He fell and hit his head. He's unconscious and bleeding all over the place."

A trembling hand was pressed against her lips. Andrew—bright, vivacious Andrew—unconscious and bleeding? No, no. "Has . . . has he moved? D . . . did you call an ambulance?"

"No, he hasn't moved and yes I've called an ambulance. It's on the way. Pam left with the other children about an hour ago. Joe's sergeant is radioing him. I thought if I could head Pam off she could meet us at the hospital."

Blair's heart constricted with the thought of what it would do to Pam if Andrew were seriously injured or. . . She clutched at her chest, imagining her friend's pain.

Sean said, "I've got to find her."

When the telephone went dead in her hand, she lunged out of bed, crying out in pain when the hard contact with the floor shimmied up her shin to slam against her kneecaps. Groping her way to her bureau, she dressed and dashed out the door and down the outside stairs.

Pam had apparently come by early and picked up the station wagon, for it wasn't there. She looked around frantically, wringing her hands impotently. Her eyes swept Sean's backyard, and like a neon sign had pointed it out, her brain registered the alleyway running down the side of the house. "The shortcut," she whispered. Andrew's shortcut. He'd bragged about it once, told her how he'd already worn a path through the backyards and alleys to cover the blocks from Pam's house to Sean's.

Blair started off at a run down the alley. She didn't think about the pain shooting up from her knees into her thighs, through her vital organs, along her spine straight to her brain. Indeed, she didn't even feel it.

Precious little Andrew. He loved her. Pam had said so. Pam, her best friend. Pam, whose sound advice and common sense she had often ridiculed, might be facing a crisis. She had always leaned on Pam's strength. It was time she returned the favor. Had she ever told Pam how much she valued her friendship? And Sean. He loved her. Or had, until she'd rejected his love. *Don't give up on me yet, Sean. Please.*

Through backyards and alleys, she ran. She didn't see the weeds that slashed at her bare legs or the stones that would leave bruises on her heels and the balls of her feet. She saw only Sean, coming out of the sea, naked and radiating life.

The perspiration that ran in myriad uncharted rivulets down her body went unheeded. Instead she felt Sean's caresses, tender and loving, strong and supportive.

How had she thought she could live without all he had to give? She had to get to him, tell him. She did love, did care. This was one time in his life when he might need her. She couldn't—mustn't—let him down.

She could see the skeletal framework of the roof Sean had been working on. *Thank you, God. Thank you, God. I'm almost there*, she prayed as she ran the last few yards.

She didn't know that she was running in a crouched position, her knees bent at a hideous angle, barely supporting her. She felt a dull thud as her body struck the sidewalk when she collapsed upon it. She looked down, surprised to find herself on the hot concrete.

Then, for the first time in her life, she fainted.

---

"Blair," Pam said adamantly, "I've told you this house is open to you if you want to recuperate here. I'll carry your bed pans. I'll cook your meals, wash your clothes, give you back rubs, anything. But I will not move you out of that apartment."

It was four days since Andrew's accident. Andrew was fine, proudly sporting a large bandage on his temple. Blair had progressed to sitting up with a pillow under her knees. This morning she had refused to take the pain pills the doctor had prescribed. Her knees were barely aching.

Pam had put her in a tiny spare room, where for two days wracking pain had made her oblivious to her surroundings. Yesterday, she thought she might survive. Today she was sure of it.

"I am your friend, but I'll not do your dirty work for you. If you want to move out of Sean's apartment, then you'll be the one to pay off your lease and hand him the key. Not me." Pam glared at her with exasperation. "The two of you are driving me nuts! He's been avoiding this part of the house like we all had the plague. He comes to work on the addition. He leaves. He growls at anyone who gets in his path. He looks like hell—almost as bad as you do."

"Thanks," Blair cut in on the tirade.

"He thinks you despise him."

"Despise—"

"Oh yes. He's thinking about as rationally as you are these days. Since you ruined your knees running to help him with Andrew, he naturally assumes that you'll never forgive him for calling you that morning."

"That's insane."

"Do you see now the kind of whackos I've been dealing with the past four days? And you don't want him to see you this way because he said—in anger—that he

didn't want you hobbling back to him crippled. Well, I've had it," Pam said. "I just resigned as Cupid."

Oozing righteous indignation, she stalked to the door. "By the way, your mother called. She'll call back in a day or two."

Blair extended her hand with a pleading look in her eyes. "Pam?" The other woman crumpled and returned to the side of the bed to take Blair's outstretched hand. "Thank you for everything."

"What made you pull such a dumb stunt, Blair? You knew that running over here like that would ruin your legs."

Blair shrugged, sniffed back her tears, and met Pam's concerned eyes. "I love you."

Pam had tears in her eyes, too. "I love you, too."

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When someone tapped on her door later that afternoon, Blair expected to see one of the children but it was Sean who stepped through the door.

"Pam said you wanted to see me," he said quietly.

"She—" Blair bit back her denial. The turbulence in his eyes was painful to see. He needed so badly to be absolved from the guilt of bringing on her latest setback. "Yes, I . . . I . . . she said you blamed yourself for this." Her hand swept down to take in her knees. "Sean, you mustn't. I'm not in pain. Not anymore. And if I obey the doctor this time, I won't be again. It wasn't just running to Pam's house that brought me to this lowly state," she said with a soft laugh. "It was a combination of things. All of which you warned me against by the way."

She coaxed the slightest smile from him, but he wasn't ready to redeem himself. "Thank God Andrew only had the breath knocked out of him. I wish it were that simple for you," he said quietly. "What does the doctor say?" He knew. He



had accosted him as he left the Delgados' house.

"I'm not to stand or walk on my own for two weeks: then I can start with short distances and gradually build up. I have to go to the hospital several times a week for ultrasonic treatments. He also recommended taking cortisone shots, but I don't want to. And I refuse to take pain pills."

She ignored his snort of disagreement and went on. "In a month or so, he'll reassess the situation." Her voice changed. "If everything's healing well, I can start to build back my strength. If not," she said gruffly, "I may have to have surgery. That would entail months of therapy, and I'd more than likely never be able to dance again. At least not professionally."

"And if you had this surgery and all that it entailed, would you be devastated?" he asked.

"Yes." She was still looking down so she didn't see the agonized expression that tore across his already ravaged face.

"I see."

"Because you said you wouldn't want me anymore if I wasn't any good to anybody else. If I was—"

"Blair," he cried, rounding the bed and falling to his knees beside her. "Is that why you'd be inconsolable?"

She nodded. "I would be a physical wreck, Sean. I'd have to be waited on, I'd have scars, I'd have to use a wheelchair until—"

"Blair, Blair," he said, burrowing his face in her lap. "I don't care if you have to crawl on your belly. I'll always want you."

"But you said—"

He raised his head, his agony apparent. "Forgive me. A million times since then, I've cursed myself for saying such an insensitive thing to you. I was mad, frustrated, loving you so much it was killing me, and dying because my love wasn't enough for you."

She closed her hands around his golden head. "It is, it is," she said with a sense of desperation. "I was such a fool, Sean. Spoiled and selfish. Forgive me for not accepting your love, not knowing how to love you back. It had never happened to me before. I was afraid of commitment to anything but dance."

His fingers smoothed along her temple. "Darling, I hope you dance again. I want you to. Never think I wanted you to stop for any other reason but because it was injurious to you. When I saw you falling, laying there on the concrete, I thought I'd die."

"I know you'd like to see me dance again," she said, smiling. "If nothing else, I could be one of the best coaches on the East Coast. And I've got the dancing school here, don't forget. It may have to be suspended for a while, but as soon as I'm able—"

He placed a finger over her lips. "Don't get too ambitious. I don't want you to ever be disappointed again."

"I won't be, I promise. As long as I have you."

"You do." He kissed her mouth softly. "Blair, darling, you know I'm old-fashioned." The quiet words struck her heart with the impetus of lightning. "I've never lived with a woman. That particular privilege was reserved for my wife. At least I hope you'll think of it as a privilege. Just as I hope you'll consent to being my wife."

She nodded eagerly and kissed him, the magic of his mouth having a dramatic effect on her faculties.

He slid one arm beneath her knees and the other behind her back and lifted her off the bed. Trustingly she linked her arms behind his neck. "Where are we going?" she asked, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Home," he said softly.

They passed Pam in the hall. She was slyly smiling. ♥

# Food for Thought

***Peck Sadler and Emily Jane Reed belong together, but misunderstandings keep them apart. Will they ever give in and simply follow their hearts?***

**ANN K. SMITH**

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**“W**ell, Mom, I did it,” Peck Sadler said aloud.

Strong hands with calloused tanned fingers reached out to straighten a sateen bow on the potted pink gloxinia he’d set at the headstone moments ago.

“You’d be proud of the way they all turned out, Mom,” he said to the glazed marker. “Jim just graduated from college and is going to be a career military man. He really likes the discipline.” Peck chuckled. “You’d find that hard to believe

after all the trouble he gave me growing up. But he’s going to turn out okay after all.

“And Clark has only another year of medical school. Ty’s in Texas now, getting ready to go to the Middle East on some kind of oil related junket.”

Peck noted the dates on the matching headstones of his parents. Fourteen years had passed; fourteen years since he’d had to be both parents to his three brothers.

All that had happened in those fourteen

years seemed to pass into nothing as Peck remembered that fateful night only two days after his twenty-first birthday. The authorities had called him in Iowa City at the University with the tragic news—his dad had been killed outright in a bizarre traffic accident and his mother wasn't expected to last the night.

She'd asked for him and he'd barely made it to her bedside. His three younger brothers, scared, were huddled together in the emergency waiting room, tears lining their faces. He remembered hugging all of them before going in to see his mother. Her words burned in his memory as he'd held her hand and listened to her impassioned plea.

"Peck," she whispered, "promise me you'll take care of the boys."

"Yes, Mama," he'd answered, too emotional to say more.

"It won't be easy, but you can make men of them. Don't let anyone take them from you. Promise me that. All of you stay together."

"I promise."

"You're a good boy, Peck. I love you."

"I love you, too, Mama," he'd said through his tears. Now he wondered if she'd heard him.

Peck glanced around him, surprised to see the early summer day and the blazing sunshine. His mind had been thoroughly engrossed in that final scene in the hospital room. But fourteen years had inured him to tears. Privately he'd shed them, but outwardly he'd had to take control and responsibility and be strong for his brothers.

He smiled as he stood from his haunches and looked over the neat graves. Aloud again he said, "You'd both be proud of them." It wasn't that he meant to slight his father, because they, too, had had a close relationship. It was just that he'd made the promise to his mother. She was the one he'd always found it easiest to talk to.

As he walked away from the tombstones, Peck thought of that day's graduation ceremony. While Jim hadn't graduated at the top of his class, he'd done all right. Clark had stood beside Peck and they'd exchanged grins; it had been a long haul, but Jim had made it. Clark had left immediately to go back to school and Peck had come to the cemetery to pay his respects and report on the family. Over the years he hadn't come to the graveyard but a handful of times; only when events were too overwhelming, only when he had major decisions to make about his brothers.

Walking slowly, Peck recalled the hassle he'd gone through with the social service authorities about keeping his brothers. That hadn't been easy. It had taken a battery of smart-talking lawyers to convince the judge that a twenty-one-year-old could handle the ominous task.

Running the business hadn't been easy either. When his father died, Sadler and Sons had only been a fledgling operation. His parents had borrowed heavily to start the food distributorship and it fell to Peck to manage it.

"And a damn good job I did, too," he stated, getting into his truck.

Naturally, Peck had dropped out of college immediately and thanked his lucky stars he'd worked summers at the warehouse. He knew the systems since his father'd insisted that he learn the business from the ground up. And he'd had a few lucky breaks. The life insurance had helped to pay off some of the debt, almost half. His father's friend and marketing manager, Everett Tucker, had taken control of all the selling and left Peck to run the warehouse. Everett knew the Cedar Rapids area and in fourteen years, Peck hadn't had any problems with that part of the business. As markets expanded, Everett had moved into a northeast office in River Ridge Business Park across the Cedar River and had hired his own staff,

most of whom Peck didn't even know. The southwest warehouse took up a great deal of time and energy, all that Peck could spare from his duties as parent to his younger brothers.

And what a challenge that had been! When the elder Sadlers had died, Ty was only thirteen, Clark eleven, and Jim eight. Peck thought of the sign that hung over the doorway to the warehouse. The "S" that had been added to Sons had never quite been the same size or color as the rest of the wording. Alice and Grover Sadler had thought they'd only have the one son, Peck. After eight years, however, along came Ty, then Clark, then Jim.

And not one of them wanted anything to do with the food business. Ty and Clark had convinced Jim to turn over all of their shares to Peck for the job he'd done in raising them. They'd presented him with the *fait accompli* on his thirty-fifth birthday. It was the first time in fourteen years he'd felt like crying again.

Peck drove through the gate of the cemetery with a light heart. A milestone had been reached; he'd fulfilled a promise; he had a sense of accomplishment.

Now his life was his own.

---

Emily Jane Reed grinned with satisfaction as she assembled the folder of research she'd just completed. It'd taken her almost a full year to get all the information she needed for her proposal to Everett Tucker.

Dressed in what she thought of as her corporate uniform of a gray striped business suit, white silk blouse, conservative silk maroon tie and black mid-heel pumps, she jauntily wended her way to Everett's office.

"Is Everett in?" she asked his secretary.

"No, he called in sick. His wife said he'd been having chest pains," Cloe Banner answered. "I don't like the sound of it."

"I don't either. Keep me informed, will you? I'm sure he'll let me know if he wants me to fill in for him with Mr. Sadler tomorrow."

Cloe laughed. "You're probably the only person in the world who calls Peck Mr. Sadler."

Pertly, Emily answered. "I don't know what else I would call him. In the almost three years I've worked here, I've never even laid eyes on him."

"It'd be a treat for you," Cloe mumbled.

"Pardon?"

"I haven't seen him myself for about eight years," Cloe reminisced, "ever since we moved out here. But he certainly was a good looking young man then."

"What's he look like?"

"Oh, he's about five eleven, or maybe six feet tall, has light brown hair and eyes, pretty eyes for a man, and a sexy body," she concluded.

"Cloe! You're turning into a dirty old woman!" Emily said with a grin.

"It's all those romance novels I read. Makes me aware of what people look like. But to be honest, I'm old enough to be his mother."

"Is he married?" Emily asked casually, not really interested.

"No, he never had time for that. He had his brothers to raise, you know."

"No, I don't know. In fact, I don't know anything about the Sadlers. I assumed Mr. Sadler was about Everett's age . . ."

"Oh, no! Actually, Mr. Sadler, the one who started the business, died some years ago. He and his wife were killed in an auto accident. Peck is the oldest son. He runs the business and he raised his three brothers, singlehandedly. Did quite a job of it, too. Never asked for any help so far as I know."

"Really?"

Cloe had a faraway look in her eyes.

"Yes, he was burdened with a great deal when he was very young, about twenty-one; I believe."

"How did they turn out—the brothers, I mean?" Emily asked.

"Pretty well. Peck sent them all to college. One's a petroleum engineer, another's going to medical school and the youngest just graduated from college. Going into the military, I think Everett said."

"Isn't it strange he doesn't ever come here?"

"He doesn't have any reason to. Everett was with his father in the early days of the company and Peck naturally entrusted him with all the responsibilities for marketing. Peck strictly runs the warehouse. And you know that Everett meets with him there once a week."

Emily thought that an unusual way to run a business, but she had no complaints about her job. Just out of college, with a degree in Home Economics and a minor in marketing, she'd first gone to work for a food brokerage house in Chicago. Dedicated to her career, she'd advanced swiftly through the ranks into the corporate world. Known as a go-getter who was full of ideas and enthusiasm, she'd become very knowledgeable about food distribution.

Three years ago, when Everett Tucker had been in Chicago on business, they'd talked and she'd been surprised when she received a job offer from him. Out of opportunities at her firm in Chicago, she'd jumped at the chance to change her lifestyle and get into another market area.

Everett outlined the business of Sadler and Sons in the most general of terms, giving her no insight into the personality of the owner. Since coming to the company, she'd taken over four major accounts from Everett and expanded sales into the gourmet food markets, managing ten new accounts. Although a taciturn man, Everett was pleased with her work,

and reflected his pleasure with periodic raises.

Her new lifestyle suited her—she loved her apartment and the social life in Cedar Rapids. She'd made friends outside the company and she taught a course on food preparation at Coe College in the evenings. She dated frequently and was on the symphony committee. At thirty, she still had all the enthusiasm she'd brought to her first job. And when Everett came back to work, she would be ready to present her plans.

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"This is Peck," Peck said into the mouthpiece of the telephone. He pushed piles of papers aside with greasy fingers to allow room for his elbows. He really was going to have to do something about his messy office.

"This is Amelia Tucker," a teary voice responded.

"Amelia, what's wrong?"

"Everett has had a heart attack, a major one, Peck."

"Amelia, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to come to the hospital?"

"No, I'm all right. My kids are here with me. I just wanted you to know."

"How is he?" Peck asked.

"As well as to be expected, I guess," she replied, then went on to explain the situation. "I don't know what you'll do about his job."

"Don't worry about it. And tell Everett not to worry, Amelia. I'll take care of things. And if there's anything I can do . . ."

"We'll be all right. You'll come see him when he can have visitors?"

"You know I will. Take care, Amelia, and call me if you need anything, anything at all."

"Damn!" he murmured when he'd hung up the telephone. Although he was concerned for Everett, his mind raced to the

practical side of what he would do without him. Viewing the axle grease on his hands, he strode to the men's room to wash it off. Decisions had to be made, phone calls placed and now he'd have to spend some time in his office. Working on trucks would have to be put aside until some management problems were straightened out.

Back in his office, Peck called his secretary in and let her take over the social amenities of checking on Everett and sending flowers. For the first time in years, he called Everett's office and got Cloe on the line. She was a little teary and said Mrs. Tucker had just called her.

"We've got some decisions to make, Cloe. Who's in charge when Everett isn't there?"

"Normally, Art Farrell but he's on vacation. I suppose Emily could answer any questions you have."

"Fine. You know Everett came to give me a weekly update every Friday. Will you ask somebody else to do it instead?" Peck's mind was on so many other things that he was only half paying attention to what Cloe said. He hadn't even caught the other person's name. "Tomorrow at nine?"

"Sure, Peck," said the efficient secretary.

Peck hung up, regretting that he hadn't taken a broader interest in the business before this. But everything had run so smoothly with Everett Tucker in control of marketing. Peck stared at his calloused hands. He liked working in the warehouse, fixing trucks, helping on the loading dock. Was that all going to come to a halt now with Everett incapacitated?

You could have knocked Peck Sadler over with a feather when he yelled, "Come in" at nine the next morning and Emily Jane Reed stepped into his cluttered office.

Short, thick blond hair surrounded a pretty face with the biggest, bluest eyes Peck'd ever seen. Pink, smiling lips parted to reveal pearly teeth. The navy of her tailored pants suit and the pristine white of her blouse formed a frame for her lovely face. As if in slow motion, Peck dropped his booted feet from the top of his desk as he stared.

"Mr. Sadler?" she questioned when he didn't say anything.

"Yes?"

Stepping forward with briefcase in her left hand, her right extended for a handshake, she smiled widely. "I'm Emily Reed, one of Everett's account managers."

Peck got to his feet and met her hand, so feminine and soft and little. So little. He was surprised at the strength of the handshake. It suddenly occurred to him the name Cloe had said.

"This is a surprise," he breathed out at last.

"What's a surprise?" she questioned, looking around for somewhere to sit.

"You are. I assumed all the account managers were men."

"Do you mind if I move these?" She indicated a stack of trucking manuals on the only chair in front of his desk. At the shake of his head, she dumped them unceremoniously onto the floor. "Didn't Everett tell you I was a woman?"

"No," he answered succinctly.

With good humor, she grinned at him. "Well, I am."

He barely smiled. "So I see."

"I'm sorry about Everett, Mr. Sadler," she began.

"No one calls me anything but Peck."

"All right. As I was saying, I'm sorry about Everett, but I think I can run the marketing department sufficiently until Art comes back in two weeks." With feminine approval, she was evaluating Peck Sadler. Everything Cloe had said about



him was true. He had gorgeous brown eyes and a very sexy body. He was trim in a lanky way, the faded Levis hugging his narrow hips and the green cotton knit shirt stretched taut over a muscled chest and bulging biceps. It was apparent that he was no stranger to manual labor.

But she was here for business. "Art's usually in charge when Everett is out of the office."

Peck finally took his eyes off her. Damn! It had been a long time since he'd seen such a pretty woman! "Who?" he said vaguely.

"Art Farrell," she said exasperatedly. "He's Everett's right hand man." What in the world did Everett and Peck talk about on Fridays?

Peck blinked his eyes and wondered if she thought him a complete and total idiot. She just wasn't what he expected. He was going to have to get out in the world more. "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention, Emily. Go on."

She rummaged in her briefcase and pulled out sales charts and papers for him to read. Without thinking about it, she stood and walked behind his desk, laying out the papers on top of the collection of papers, catalogs and brochures heaped on the desk. She pushed back two empty styrofoam cups that might have held coffee some years ago. How could anyone run a business in this mess?

"These are the sales figures for the last month, up three percent over April, as you'll note," she said with a smile, pleased that most of the increase was her doing.

She brushed his arm as she moved a page and instinctively, Peck moved back.

"Sorry," she muttered and stepped back herself. Obviously the man didn't like for anyone to get too close. Peck waited until she had moved a sufficient distance and sat down, then he grabbed the edges of the computer sheets and began reading them.

Everything was in better order than when Everett made the presentation each week.

When he finished, he looked across at her. "This looks good. Any problems?" he questioned, just as he did with Everett.

"No."

"Then I expect you or Art will be here next week for a report?"

"Yes. Will that be all?"

Peck nodded. He needed this woman out of here. She smelled entirely too good for one thing. His pulse was racing as he pushed back from his desk. "Call my secretary if you have any questions, Emily," he said by way of dismissal.

Her smile was almost his undoing. "I will. And I'm sure you'll hear from Art when he gets back." She rose from the chair and reached for her briefcase. "It was nice to have met you . . . Peck," she finished.

"Yeah, nice," he mumbled as she closed the door behind her.

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When Emily went back to her office, she answered Cloe's questions about how the review went.

But Emily didn't get to ask her own. She could have asked Cloe a hundred things about Peck Sadler, but none of them had to do with the food brokerage business. Why did he have such calloused hands? Why was his office such a mess? Why wasn't he married? Did he date? Who? Why didn't he like to be touched? The list went on.

Peck wasn't faring any better. In the years he'd had the boys and the business, he'd rarely dated. There was always so much to do and never enough time to get everything done. Other than seeing Mrs. Brown, his secretary, and an occasional female representative from a food company, he lived in a man's world. Mrs. Brown was in her early sixties and hardly the object of any romantic notions. The female reps were all business, and to be

truthful, he'd never dealt with any of them any differently than he had with a man. The warehouse was almost exclusively male.

Even the housekeeper at home, such as he was, had been a man. When Peck had advertised for a housekeeper, his only consideration had been to find someone who could cook and do laundry. "Salty" Hanks had been the first person to apply and Peck had hired him on the spot, greatly relieved to have someone to take over the household duties.

Salty had retired from the navy as a cook and had come inland as far as he could get from the ocean. In his own way, he'd been just what the Sadler brothers had needed. He did laundry, put substantial meals, if not gourmet, on the table, and did a reasonable, if not good, job of keeping the house neat. He'd kept tabs on the youngsters for Peck and offered some advice when asked. The arrangement had suited everyone. But with only Peck at home now, Salty had gone to Oregon to live with his sister.

When Emily left his office, Peck sat for a long time thinking about her. It was asinine to let a woman get under his skin in such a short period of time.

And he knew virtually nothing about her. Was she married? Single? The way she smelled. . . . Emily Reed made him suddenly realize just what an insular life he'd led. Maybe it was time to get out, date, establish a decent relationship with a woman.

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The following week, Emily came again with the report, stating that Friday was the only day Art could call on his major account. So, if Peck didn't mind, she'd come to the warehouse every week until Everett returned.

Peck had few questions for her since the reports were very clear. Emily told him she and Art would split Everett's work-

load, and Peck gave her authority to make decisions that were normally made by Everett. The meeting was as short as the week before, and Emily stopped and chatted briefly with Mrs. Brown on her way out.

After another few weeks, when it was clear that Everett would be off work for six more months, Emily decided to take the bull by the horns and propose her ideas to Peck for expanding the business. After all, she hadn't gotten where she was by being shy. She'd made a friend of Mrs. Brown and asked her to inform Peck that she would need a longer time with her weekly report the second week in July.

That week, after Peck had reviewed the comprehensive reports she'd provided, he sat back in his chair.

"The reports are fine, as usual. Now what else is on your mind?" he asked.

"A lot of things, Peck," she said casually, comfortable with using his first name now. "I realize I'm the new kid on the block, but I'm no stranger to the food business. If Everett had been here, I'd have presented this to him first and let him talk to you about it."

"About what?"

"I think Sadler and Sons should sponsor a food show. Rent the Five Seasons Center, invite food brokers to set up booths and give cooking demonstrations, get appliance dealers to display ovens, microwaves, food processors, that sort of thing. Here let me show you." She opened her thick folder and laid it on his desk.

"A food show?" Peck asked hesitantly.

"Yes, they go over quite well in major cities. Haven't you ever heard of them?"

"Somewhere in the periphery of my mind, I suppose I have. But not in Cedar Rapids. I can't ever recall having one here."

She could sense his reluctance, so she launched into an explanation of the benefits to Sadler and Sons and how it would eventually increase profit margins and ac-

counts. It was more than two hours later when Peck leaned back again and looked at her.

"It's not the worst idea I've ever heard," he conceded. "But it would be lots of work."

"I'd be happy to be in charge of it," she volunteered.

"Don't you have enough to do with Everett gone?"

She smiled at him, a smile that almost melted his bones. While he'd gotten used to seeing her at the warehouse on Fridays and occasionally on other days, he still hadn't inured himself to having such a pretty face around. And he'd done nothing about seeing other women.

"I'd set up a task force, a committee, if you will," she explained succinctly. "From talking to Mrs. Brown I gather she could help if you'd allow it." Her eyebrows raised in silent questioning.

"That's fine, but when did you plan to have this?"

"That depends on when we could get the Five Seasons Center but I'd like to target it for the fall. As for my workload, I've been very successful in computerizing the ordering with Randall's and many of the smaller accounts. Cloe can handle those. She really should have a raise, Peck," Emily explained.

Peck grinned at her forthrightness. No doubt about it, Everett had a handful with Emily Reed working for him. "I'll see to Cloe's raise."

"And the food show?"

"Let me think about it."

"Can we discuss it next week? Tuesday?"

She simply wasn't going to let him off the hook, he could see that. Out of nowhere, he said, "How about over dinner Saturday night?"

"I'm sorry, but I have other plans for Saturday. How about Tuesday at ten?" She softened her refusal with a smile.

After she left, Peck could have kicked himself for being so forward. Her polite but firm refusal let him know in no uncertain terms that she didn't want any outside relationship with him. She was strictly business. It was probably just as well. He didn't need any complications like Emily Reed in his life.

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The only truly administrative duty that Peck had retained was the buying for Sadler and Sons. He'd hired or promoted personnel to assist him, but the final decisions were left to him.

One of the more aggressive female reps had just left when Emily entered the warehouse on Tuesday to discuss the food show. Mrs. Brown was not at her desk when Emily came into the outer office, so Emily hesitated when she heard male laughter coming from Peck's office. While she didn't mean to eavesdrop, there was no way she could avoid hearing what was being said behind the partially closed door.

"Yeah, and she probably wears those pants to bed, too," Chad Ross said with a laugh. Emily recognized the voice of Peck's assistant buyer.

Peck usually bypassed male discussions about women. To be truthful, he seldom had anything to contribute. But today he and Chad had been conducting business since early that morning and they were taking a coffee break.

"Is she the one the guys in the back call 'Old Ironpants'?" Peck asked idly, not really interested.

"Sure is." Laughter again.

"I thought you asked her out once," Peck said.

"Not me! I like my women all soft and feminine and in skirts. Those pants suits hide all the good parts of a woman."

"You're a leg man, then," Peck asked with a grin, slipping into the lingo the warehouse men bandied.

Chad laughed again. "Among other things. But we probably wouldn't want to see her in a dress. She may have legs like stumps."

Peck chuckled, then added, "I'll have to agree that she's not too feminine. Even with that feminine name, and knowing everything about the food business, she probably can't cook worth a damn, either."

They laughed heartily and Emily blushed heatedly. They were talking about her! In a flash she realized she had worn only pantsuits whenever she'd come to the warehouse. How dare they! But she continued to listen.

Chad's voice was muffled and Emily could tell that he had asked Peck a question.

"Mmmm. . . ." Peck, answered, his mind obviously drifting. "Enough about women, Chad. What *are* we going to do about the food show?"

From the way Peck stressed the word, Emily could only conclude that they'd been talking about it before they'd veered off into a degrading male attack on her clothing and looks. The conversation was lost as Mrs. Brown shuffled back into the room and from force of habit, closed Peck's door, obliterating all sound from the office.

As difficult as it was for Emily to talk calmly with Mrs. Brown, she composed herself as they chatted about the business. When there was a lull, Mrs. Brown buzzed Peck on the intercom to let him know Emily was there. Quickly Chad stepped out of the office with a smile on his face.

How two-faced men could be! He talked to her as if he'd never uttered a derogatory word about her. Schooled in corporate politics for the last seven years, Emily smoothly let her anger subside and exchanged pleasantries with Chad, then excused herself to go see Peck. Somehow

she'd change their idea of her, but she'd have to work on that later. Now she had the selling job of her life.

Peck smiled as pleasantly as Chad and took the wind out of her sails by telling her immediately that he approved of the food show. Flattered that her business acumen was accepted, even if they found her wanting in the feminine department, she began a plan of action with Peck. She promised a detailed schedule by their Friday meeting.

When their discussion ended, Peck headed out the side door of his office to the warehouse and Emily went back towards the main entrance, failing to close the door between his office and Mrs. Brown's.

"Did you see the editorial in the paper about the symphony, Emily?" Mrs. Brown asked after they'd covered a number of other subjects about the food show.

"Yes, and I thought the editor was a little unfair, as usual," Emily said.

The two women had discovered a mutual interest in the symphony. Mrs. Brown worked on one of the committees to select guest artists. This was the second time that an editorial had been written about the foibles of the symphony.

"Men can be so unyielding sometimes, don't you think?" the secretary said. "He has to know we'd get better talent if we had more money in the budget. A sizable contribution wouldn't be turned down, I can tell you!"

"He has a lot of other faults, besides jaded opinions about the symphony," Emily said with a smile.

"Like what?"

"He has absolutely no sense of advertising, for example. I'll bet I could increase his business three times over if I were in control of it," Emily stated unequivocally.

"He's a bachelor, you know. And now that his family's gone, he owns the whole ball of wax."

"Yes, I know." Emily tilted her head at Mrs. Brown and grinned. "He's not all that bad looking, either. I suppose I could make myself indispensable to him and get him to marry me. Then I'd have his company, all that money and I could just send him out to play and handle everything myself."

They laughed heartily at the possibilities before Emily bade her good-bye.

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Good Lord! They're talking about me! Peck thought as he stood silently at his desk. Although he'd gone to the warehouse to find the foreman, he'd remembered a stack of invoices he needed to drop off to the clerk in accounting. Hearing Emily's voice clearly through the open door, he'd stopped and listened just in time to hear her say he had no sense of advertising. He knew eavesdroppers never heard any good of themselves, but the conversation was so compelling that he'd stood riveted to the spot until he heard Emily leave Mrs. Brown's office.

Anger such as he couldn't remember having in a long time surfaced. The woman was a piranha, who wanted to take over his business, who was even willing to marry him to get it! His fists clenched as he thought over what he'd heard. Send me out to play, would she?

And Mrs. Brown. That kindly old lady who'd worked for him and his father for years. She was one of the few, the *very* few, people who knew that his brothers had turned over all of their holdings in Sadler and Sons to him. And she was sitting out there spouting out his personal business. What the hell was happening around here?

Peck waited an ample amount of time in his office before he quietly closed the door to the warehouse. Then he closed the office door between him and Mrs. Brown. He just wasn't ready to face her yet. The perfidy of the woman!

Retaliation against Emily Reed was the primary thought on his mind. He'd call and tell her the food show was canceled. No, he'd let her go ahead with it and hope she fell flat on her pretty face.

That was stupid. Sadler and Sons stood to gain a great deal of business if it was successful. Why the hell did Everett Tucker have to have a heart attack?

Peck pressed the intercom button. "Mrs. Brown, I'm going out to work on a truck. I won't be in the rest of the day," he spit out defiantly without allowing her any time to answer.

He knew it was escapism but he needed to think. In the last fourteen years, when he'd had a problem with one of the boys, he'd worked it out by manual labor. And that little sweet smelling snip of a woman had become a problem for him, perhaps the biggest one he'd ever had.

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When Emily reached her apartment that evening, she changed into cutoffs and a scalloped neck cotton shirt, then stood in front of a full length mirror and looked at herself critically.

Not feminine, huh? So that's what Peck Sadler thought. She noted the soft curve of her breasts in the clinging fabric. Her waist was small and her hips flared just like they were supposed to. And her legs weren't like stumps!

Damn those men, anyhow! She was a woman who could do womanly things. But a business office was just that. What did they expect? Frilly blouses, mini skirts and a drenched in perfume marketing manager?

As Emily went about her evening routine, she agonized over what the two men had said. It didn't really bother her what Chad thought. Word had it that he was quite a ladies man and never serious about anyone. But Peck, that was a different matter. She liked him and found him appealing. If she hadn't committed herself to

the symphony fundraiser that Saturday night, she'd have loved to go out with him. He had a certain shyness, a little-boy-lost demeanor that fascinated her.

Why am I letting this bother me? she questioned, taking out her frustration in the kitchen, as usual. She'd chopped too many vegetables for her stir-fry dinner and was half way through baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies when she admitted the answer.

Because you really care what Peck Sadler thinks of you. You care a lot.

But even this insight didn't resolve anything. Everyone accepted that she knew the food business, and Peck had agreed to the food show. She wasn't about to change her entire wardrobe to suit a man. She was a professional person and she'd dress accordingly. Maybe Peck would see her one day in a non-work situation and be surprised at how feminine she looked.

Boy, would that be the day! She grinned at the thought.

As luck would have it, the problem with the truck that Peck began working on proved to be nothing more than a dirty carburetor and he was able to fix it in record time. It was quitting time and he said a perfunctory good night to the workers as they filed past him out the door. He cleaned the grease off his hands and got into his pickup truck.

He decided he'd have pizza tonight. Now that Salty and Jim were no longer at the house, Peck's meals had been one instant dinner after another. Salty hadn't been the best of cooks, but anything was better than eating out every night or carrying in something.

He picked up a hot pizza and placed it on the seat beside him, then pulled out into traffic. He was probably out of beer. Better stop at a Quik Trip.

That was the last coherent thought he had. Out of a side street, a delivery van cut

across two lanes of traffic and hit Peck's truck broadside. The impact threw him across the vinyl seat and slammed his body into the opposite door.

His world went black.

Mrs. Brown, an early riser, had been the first to discover Peck's accident by reading about it in the morning paper. By six o'clock, she'd called the hospital to get a status report on his condition and by seven, she had all the facts of the accident from the police. When Sadler and Sons opened at eight, she was ready to take charge.

Until she talked with Peck she wasn't sure if she should contact his brothers, so she dealt with the running of the business. Emily, Chad and the warehouse foreman were called for a conference.

"I suppose all of you know that Peck was in a serious car wreck last night," she opened.

"Does anyone know how he is?" Chad quickly asked.

"I called the hospital early this morning and all they would tell me is that he has a few broken bones, lots of contusions and a concussion."

Mrs. Brown waited until they were all paying attention again before she outlined her plans.

"As all of you know, Peck has never organized this company for anyone to run it but him. Since his parents died, I can't remember a day when he wasn't here. If Everett Tucker were here, I'm sure he'd take charge, but since he's not, we'll just have to fill in the gaps. Al," she spoke to the foremen, "I'm sure you won't have any problems with the warehouse."

"No," he answered.

"And Chad, you'll have to see to all the buying and supervise the accounting department."

"What about invoices? You know, Peck reviewed them all personally."



"You'll have to do it," Mrs. Brown replied. "This is going to take extra effort from all of us. Emily, you and Art won't have any problems with sales?"

"No, I don't think so," Emily said, not foreseeing anything that she and Art hadn't handled since Everett had been out.

Mrs. Brown smiled at everyone. "Fine. I'm going to the hospital this morning to see Peck and if he wants things handled any differently, I'll let you know. But I'd like to alleviate him of all worry for now. I don't know how the rest of you feel, but Peck has been good to me and it's time we repaid him."

All the managers nodded in agreement.

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Peck had come to in the wee hours of the morning only to be told of his accident by a nurse. He felt like hell, but refused to have anyone notified until he could think through what he wanted done.

By the time he woke up again, Mrs. Brown was standing at the edge of his bed.

"I hope you feel better than you look," she said with a smile.

He tried to smile at her but it was too painful. "Not much," he mumbled.

"The doctor says other than your broken leg and arm, you'll be okay in a few days. You're not going to look too pretty, but that will fade, he says."

Peck looked at the casts on his left leg and right arm. "How long am I going to be in here?"

"You only have to stay until they're sure your concussion is gone, but you need care and rest for another month. I talked with your doctor a few minutes ago. It's more than just this accident, Peck. He says you're run down, don't have any reserves left. But he'll let you go home if you have someone to stay with you."

"Would you call Salty Hanks for me?

His number in Oregon is in my address book on my desk." Just saying that much had worn him out and Mrs. Brown could see it.

"I'll try to reach Salty. Peck, we don't want you to worry about Sadler and Sons. Chad is taking over all your responsibilities, Al says he won't have any trouble with the warehouse, and Emily and Art will take care of sales. Now, do you want me to call your brothers?"

Thinking was just too much effort. "No," he said as he drifted off to sleep again.

Business at Sadler and Sons went on as usual for the next three days. Contrary to Peck's orders, Mrs. Brown notified his brothers but told them not to worry about Peck. But she didn't have any luck with getting Salty Hanks. Every time she phoned the number in Peck's book, there wasn't any answer.

Peck was champing at the bit to get out of the hospital, but the doctor wouldn't release him until someone could stay with him full time. So Mrs. Brown called another conference.

"We have a problem," she stated when everyone was seated. "Peck wants out of the hospital but has to have someone in the house with him until he's mobile."

"Can't he hire a nurse?"

"I've tried to find one, believe me. Besides a chronic nurse shortage in this area, almost no one is available for private nursing, no matter what anyone's willing to pay. I've called everywhere. The best that can be offered is a visiting nurse who will come in and bathe him every day. But he has to have meals cooked, laundry done, all that sort of thing. Do any of you know of someone who could do that for him for a month or so?"

"I can, Mrs. Brown," Emily said. "Art can run the sales part of the business and basically, I've freed up my time to plan the food show, anyhow. If we put a computer

and a modern in his house and I have a telephone there, I could do it all from Peck's." With a smile at the others, but especially Chad, remembering the conversation she'd overheard between him and Peck, she finished with, "I can cook and do laundry."

"Oh, Emily, would you? You wouldn't think that was too much to ask?"

"No problem. I'll make plans to move my things out to his house today. Al, will you make a truck available to take a computer out to Peck's?"

"Sure thing."

Mrs. Brown filled Emily in further after the others had left.

"I don't know how much you know about Peck, Emily," she began. "But he's not going to like what we've decided to do, I can tell you that."

Emily laughed. "You mean he's not going to like having me in the house?"

"Peck's very independent. He's always been the one everyone turned to for solutions. He was just a kid himself when his parents died and he fought a major battle to keep his brothers. But he was twenty-one and had made a promise to his mother that he would keep them together. He took good care of them, Emily, really good care. He trotted them off to church every Sunday, the same as his mother would have done. He was active in every sport they participated in and all their school activities. I believe he was even a Boy Scout leader for a couple of them. Those boys couldn't have had a better parent than Peck."

"That's commendable."

"Oh, it's more than that. He worked hard at this business so he could afford to send them to college. That's the reason there isn't anyone to take charge when he's not here. He did everything himself, still does, even now that they're all gone." Mrs. Brown looked Emily directly in the eye. "He needs more than just someone to

keep house for him, Emily. He really needs some tender loving care for himself."

"I'll do the best I can," she said warily.

Mrs. Brown giggled. "He just doesn't like to be beholden to anyone. So, I've decided we won't tell him."

"Is that wise?" Emily could see herself losing her job over this.

"Let me handle it, Emily. He's asked me to locate his former housekeeper, Salty Hanks, and I'll just let on that I have. Peck has to be taken home in an ambulance and we'll just present him with you instead."

The women made plans for Peck to come home the next day, Saturday, in the afternoon, so Emily had plenty of time to get herself organized. She took great glee in selecting her clothing for her stay. Since she'd be working out of Peck's house, she wouldn't have to wear business clothing, and she chose a variety of casual outfits plus what she'd need for activities related to the food show.

She packed her car with house plants and the cooking equipment she was used to on that Friday night. Early on Saturday morning, she went to Econofoods, stocking up on items for wholesome, nutritious meals. Her car loaded, she drove southwest out Williams Boulevard past the warehouse, following Mrs. Brown's directions to the Sadler farmhouse.

Curiosity abounded as she pulled her car in front of the Sadler house, which was in gross disrepair. The lawn needed mowing, and flower gardens had been allowed to run wild. The frame house needed painting, the front porch sagged in places and dilapidated lounge furniture was scattered about.

The inside was worse. Room by room, Emily traipsed through, shaking her head at the disarray. Curtains and draperies were limp and dirty. Magazines, books, old TV Guides, empty beer cans, soda bottles and pizza cartons littered every

available surface.

It looked exactly like Peck's office. It also looked like five men had lived there without a woman.

Without unloading a thing, Emily got back in her car and headed for Econofoods again. Armed with disinfectants, room deodorizers and every cleaning supply she thought she needed, she went back to the house.

By the time Peck and Mrs. Brown arrived, Emily had made great headway. But she couldn't deny that she was nervous about Peck's reaction to her presence. He didn't disappoint her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked angrily when she came to the front door.

"I'll answer that, Peck," Mrs. Brown spoke up. "I couldn't locate Salty Hanks, so Emily volunteered to stay with you." At his beginning protest, she held up her hand. "Let me tell you something, young man," she expostulated, "you need someone here or you couldn't have been released from the hospital. A nurse wasn't available. Now we've done all we can and we're sorry if this doesn't suit you, but it's the best we could manage."

He didn't say anything, but his eyes spoke volumes as the ambulance attendants carried him upstairs to his room. Emily and Mrs. Brown followed in silence. The business of getting him settled in bed was accomplished in very little time and Mrs. Brown explained to Emily what had to be done to the abrasions on his face. Pills were laid out on the now clean and polished night stand. Mrs. Brown said good-bye to Peck but he didn't respond.

Peck had thought he'd been angry when he'd overheard the conversation between the two women in his office the week before, but it in no way compared with what he was feeling now. The gall of them! The absolute nerve! Well, little Miss Emily

Reed would get no cooperation out of him. With that thought, he drifted off to sleep, exhausted from the trip from the hospital.

A marvelous aroma of frying chicken and apples wafted around him as he came out of the fog of sleep. He reached his good hand up to rub his eyes, but when his fingers touched his face he winced.

"Hurts, does it?" Emily asked softly.

"Yeah," he mumbled.

"It's time to put some medicine on those cuts and abrasions plus you need to take a few pills," she said.

The light in the room was muted; it was twilight. He looked at Emily. Wow! If he hadn't recognized her voice, he wouldn't have been sure it was her. Dressed in pale pink short shorts and a matching top with ruffles around the sleeves and a scooped neck, she was standing at the edge of the bed with a glass of ice water and his medicine. When he looked at her, she extended a hand to him with the pills.

"I hate this," he said.

"What? Taking the medicine or having me here?"

"Both."

When she inhaled, her breasts rose and he diverted his gaze. If she was hell-bent on marrying him and getting her greedy paws on Sadler and Sons, she was off to a good start. As bad as he felt, he could feel the stirrings of desire when he looked at her.

"Look, Peck, Mrs. Brown was right, you're stuck with me. I'll do what I can for you and stay out of your way as much as possible. The least you can do is be cooperative. Now let's have a look at those bruises." She put on the bedside lamp, efficiently grabbed extra pillows and pulled him up by his good shoulder until he was sitting upright. She sensed his withdrawal.

"Did I hurt something?" she asked immediately.

"I'm not used to being touched," he gritted out.

"It's going to be a long month if you don't shape up, Peck. I have to touch you to wash your abrasions, but nothing personal is intended," she admonished.

With no further words, she sat on the edge of his bed, wrung out a clean cloth in a basin of warm water and gently dabbed at the marks on his face. Equally as tenderly, she dried each spot, then applied antiseptic. Peck's eyes followed her every move, but he didn't comment. He knew what the treatment was and he knew she was right. But it didn't make her soft touch any easier to take.

"I'm going to get your dinner, now," she announced, gathering the items she'd used. "Do you want me to help you to the bathroom first?"

"No, I can manage."

"Call me if you need me."

It was slow moving but he got to the bathroom with the aid of a crutch and was back in bed when she returned with a tray laden with food. There was no way he could hide his pleasure at what he saw. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes with cream gravy, green beans, hot rolls oozing butter, a large piece of warm apple pie with cheese and a glass of cold milk were set out beside a pristine white napkin.

"If you don't need anything else, I'll leave you to eat alone," she stated.

"Thanks," he muttered.

Emily left the room, not sure whether he meant thanks for the food, or thanks for leaving him alone. Either way, it didn't make much difference. It would take him a while to get over having her there and accepting the plans she and Mrs. Brown had made for him. She'd just wait it out. God knew she had plenty to keep her busy in the house.

She'd cleaned Peck's room and the bathroom first so he would have a minimum of disturbance. She wondered if

he'd even noticed the clean furniture, bed linen, or the curtains. Next had been the kitchen so she could get his dinner ready. What a job that was, and she still had plenty to do. Four loads of laundry had been finished that afternoon while he slept.

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Peck had noticed, all right. He hadn't slept in a bed this clean since before his mother died. As he gobbled the delicious dinner down, he looked around the room. All his clothing had been hung up, no shoes were visible, the furniture had been cleaned and waxed. She'd even washed the curtains. The whole room smelled clean and lemony. So she was a good cook and housecleaner. So what?

Emily came to remove his tray and smiled when she saw that he'd eaten everything.

"Do you need anything else?" she questioned.

"No."

"How about something to read? Do you want the TV moved up here? A radio?"

Peck was trying not to look at her. "TV wouldn't be bad, but you can't lift it."

"I brought my little one from home. I'll get it for you. Would you like another piece of pie?"

God, he hated to say yes! "If it's no trouble." He couldn't remember eating a tastier pie. The temptation was just too great.

Emily promptly returned with the portable TV and set it up for him. Then she returned to the kitchen and brought back the pie with a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream and a steaming cup of coffee with cream in it.

"I'll be in the kitchen if you need me," she said but he didn't answer. He was trying, without success, to ignore the signals his body was sending as he'd watched her cute tush while she'd moved the night stand around to his side of the bed.

Left alone, he adjusted the television

and leaned back to savor the pie and coffee. Despite the fragrance of the pie, he could still smell her perfume. But he steeled himself against all thoughts of Emily Reed. He couldn't forget her remarks to Mrs. Brown. In a very short time, he'd succumbed to the comfort of the bed and a full stomach and drifted off to sleep.

Peck had a restful night and looked much better the next morning when Emily checked on him for the third time. An early riser, she'd been up cleaning and making food preparations for the day. She smiled when she saw his eyes open.

"Good morning," she said cheerily.

"What's good about it?" he grumbled.

"The sun's shining and you look much better this morning."

"Better than what?"

She smiled, then teased, "Better than the mud fence you looked like yesterday. I think we'll cancel the leeches for treatment."

He didn't want to give her any leeway, but he couldn't help but smile. He was so stiff that he winced as he began to move but he had to go to the bathroom. Eyes fully opened, he centered his gaze on her. Good grief! Today she was dressed in cut-offs and a blue tank top, her arms carefully folded beneath her breasts while she waited for him to get up. Peck dropped his eyes to the floor. She was just too much first thing in the morning. Hell, she was barefoot! And her toenails were painted a shell pink. Think about something else, Sadler.

"The nurse who will bathe you will be here at ten," she stated matter-of-factly, "so you'll have time for breakfast beforehand. How do you like your eggs?"

"I don't care. What I want is a razor."

"With all those abrasions, they won't let you shave. Do you have an electric razor?"

"No."

"I'll get you one while I'm out."

Sarcastically, he said, "You mean you're going to leave me alone?"

"No, but while the nurse is here, I can leave. There are some things I need to get."

"Too bad."

"Look, Peck, there isn't any reason to make this difficult. I know you don't feel good, but don't take it out on me," she said angrily. "It's fairly obvious that you can't take care of yourself but that won't last forever. Now go on and let me straighten up in here."

"I thought you did all that yesterday," he complained.

She rounded on him. "I may lose my job for this but let me tell you a few home truths, buster. This is—was—a pig sty when I came in here. I know it was an all male household for a number of years, but that's no excuse for not hiring a cleaning service every once in a while. Personally, I couldn't live in this filth, so I had to clean it up for myself as well as you."

He hated to admit she was right on all counts. By the time he'd awkwardly washed his face and drenched the front of his pajamas in the process, he'd admitted to himself he needed help.

When he hobbled back into the bedroom, he was ready to apologize, but the thought left his mind when he saw her bending over the bed aligning the sheets and blankets. Pure unadulterated desire raged through him. He sat down in the nearest chair and bunched his pajama trousers in front of him. He had mixed emotions about his predicament. The last thing in the world he wanted was to be attracted to her, but he was relieved that at least some parts of his body were still in perfect working order.

"I'll just be a minute," she said when she noted his presence.

"Take your time."

Emily sensed a change of attitude with

just those three short words. "Feeling better?"

"A little. Look, Emily, I'm sorry I'm such a bear."

"That's okay, Peck, I understand."

"It's just that I'm not used to having anything done for me. It'll take a little getting used to. I don't know how I'll repay you for this. . . ."

She grinned at him. "No repayment is necessary. It's just as easy for me to live here for a month as it is at home. In fact, I'll be able to devote most of my time here to the food show without interruptions. I had a computer brought over, and they're going to install a modem tomorrow. I'll run errands while the nurse is here, and Mrs. Brown or Chad will come stay at other times when I have to be gone. There, now your bed's ready."

Peck eased his battered body back down on the mattress and silently took the pills she offered. He couldn't stay mad at her for a whole month, although he didn't expect to be indisposed that long. Although a tenacious person, he knew when to give up. And now was the time. He'd just be very careful not to let her get under his skin.

She brought his breakfast—ham, scrambled eggs, hash browned potatoes and hot, fluffy biscuits—along with fresh squeezed orange juice, hot coffee and the *Sunday Gazette*. But she left him alone to eat it, promising to return to get the empty dishes. He wished she'd stayed while he ate.

The nurse came at ten, and he bore the embarrassment of a complete bath, but felt much better when it was over. He was asleep again when Emily checked on him.

This is a mistake, she thought idly as she stood in the doorway and looked at him. There is just something infinitely appealing about a vulnerable man. She'd liked him from the first, but now . . . well, now . . . Time to go get his lunch ready,

you dolt! she chastised herself.

The days fell into a regular pattern. Emily dosed Peck with medicine every four hours, carefully shaved him every day and tended his abrasions, changed his bed while he was in the bathroom in the mornings and provided scrumptious meals to his delight.

By Wednesday, he felt remarkably fit and refused to loll about in bed any longer.

"You're allowed to sit up and walk around if you feel like it, but you can't go downstairs yet," Emily cautioned.

"Well, I'm not eating in bed anymore," he stated.

"Good. I'll bring a table up here for you."

"Would you mind coming up here to eat with me?" Peck'd been thinking that over for a few days. While her food was marvelous, it would be better if he had someone to talk to while he ate.

"I'd like that. It is lonely eating alone, isn't it?"

So another pattern was set. Emily had Chad help her with a table and the first evening at dinner she made a special effort to dress femininely.

Across a feast of roast pork, stuffing, scalloped apples, pan roasted potatoes and zucchini, her eyes met Peck's and couldn't move away. As the silence lengthened, and awareness took over, she swallowed hard.

"Uh. . . . Peck is an unusual name," she stammered, "Where did you get it?"

Peck wasn't faring any better. Her perfume surrounded him, those blue eyes mesmerized him and the ruffled vee neckline of her full dress drew his eyes. He was holding his fork in mid-air when he realized she'd asked a question. He shook his head to clear his senses.

"Peck is my middle name." He concentrated on his plate. He'd promised himself he wouldn't let this happen.



"What's your first name?"

Smiling, he looked back up at her. "Actually, my mother was a big movie fan."

"Don't tell me! Your first name is Gregory, right?" She grinned at him.

The tense moment passed. He grinned and nodded. "My brothers are Tyrone Power, Clark Gable and James Stewart Sadler. You can see why I prefer to be called Peck. And not many people know that."

Emily laughed. "I have a couple of aunts who insist on calling me Emily Jane."

"Emily's an old fashioned name."

"A little too feminine, don't you think?" She couldn't resist the reference to his conversation with Chad.

"There's nothing wrong with being feminine."

Emily let that remark pass and asked him what he did in his spare time.

Peck laughed, not bitterly, but not with humor either. "I haven't had any spare time for so long, I don't know what I'd do."

"Now that your brothers are all grown, you should have some," she rejoined.

"What do you do?"

"I have lots of interests. I'm on the steering committee for the symphony, in the winters I teach a food course at Coe College and I do needlework. I'm not very sportsminded," she said, somewhat apologetically.

This time he laughed with real humor. "That's about all I know besides the food business. I've been a coach, a referee or a timekeeper for just about every sport there is. My brothers were very active."

"Everyone says you did a good job with them," she complimented.

"I tried."

"Was it hard?"

"Sometimes it seemed like it was. I had a lot of decisions to make that I really felt I wasn't equipped to handle. But I'd rather

not talk about it, if you don't mind."

"Why not?"

Undoubtedly she was the most straightforward woman he'd ever met. Well, she'd asked. "Because I either come out sounding like a grouser or a saint. I did what I had to do, end of story."

Blue eyes fringed in dark blond lashes met his. Softly she said, "I think I'd vote on the side of saint because you gave up your entire youth for them. I hope they appreciate it."

Peck steeled himself against the moment. He'd been enjoying her company too much, the intimacy of the private dining, the easy conversation. If Mrs. Brown had filled Emily in on his circumstances, then she had to have told her about his brothers' gift of their shares of stock in the company. Who was kidding whom? He finished eating in as much silence as she would allow him, answering questions as tersely as possible.

What did I say now? Emily wondered when Peck rose abruptly as soon as he finished eating. She'd had the big television brought upstairs along with the VCR and she'd rented a couple of movies to entertain them, but she'd leave him alone now. Efficiently, she gathered the dirty dishes and put them on the tray.

"I'll be downstairs if you need anything, Peck," she threw over her shoulder as she left the room.

"Aren't we going to watch a movie?"

"You go ahead, if you like. I have some work I want to get done."

Hell's bells! Now he'd offended her. It was probably just as well to keep away from her. A man could get too used to having a woman care for him.

But it was a lonely evening for him when she didn't even come check on him. Dutifully, he took his medicine, and for the first time, a sleeping pill. Tossing and turning in those fresh smelling sheets and blankets made Emily Reed too much of a

reality.

Peck was groggy the next morning when Emily brought his coffee and juice.

"Look, Emily, I'm sorry about last night."

"No apology needed."

"I've been alone a long time and it was just too easy to talk to you. I don't deserve any extra credit for what I did and your sympathy unnerved me. Is this making any sense?" He gave up in frustration. When he looked at her, she smiled.

"It's okay, Peck, really it is. I understand. Now, if we're friends again," she looked at him questioningly and he nodded and smiled, "then suppose I outline for you what I'm doing about the food show and see if you can add anything. We'll get it right after breakfast."

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Peck was astounded at her organizational ability. She'd thought of things he wouldn't have stumbled across. Without tiring him, she let him make phone calls to the major food companies and ask for their support. Even their enthusiasm to participate surprised him.

They began to work a couple hours each morning and afternoon, then spend the evenings watching television or playing games. He'd almost forgotten the conversation he'd overheard between her and Mrs. Brown. Although his experience with women was limited, he thought that if she was making a play for him, she was being very subtle about it.

He couldn't deny that he enjoyed her company. In the next weeks, he rediscovered that he had a sense of humor and could tease and be teased. The two of them developed their own little world and he liked it. Chad and Mrs. Brown checked in on them and often stayed with him while Emily went out on business or to the store. But Peck found himself listening for her return and anticipating seeing her.

As their friendship deepened, Emily

faced the fact that she was coming to care for Peck Sadler much more than she'd anticipated. Proving that she was womanly had been easy, for she couldn't mistake the pleased gleam in his eye at the food she prepared or his offhand comments about her clothing. Once, when they'd both been propped up in his bed watching a movie on the VCR, he'd said he liked her perfume.

But the most glaring realization was that for all her efforts to be accepted in the business world, she equally enjoyed taking care of a man. She *liked* making food he wanted. She *liked* his comments and compliments. She even fantasized about having his children and keeping house for him.

She was in love with Gregory Peck Sadler! Heavens! Now what to do? She had no idea how he felt about her. Nothing he'd said indicated any future past the food show or when he went back to work. She'd just have to bide her time and let things work out.

Meanwhile, she had the responsibility of the food show. During the last week she was staying at Peck's house, she scheduled evening meetings with mothers' clubs and women's organizations in order to give out brochures on the show and answer any questions.

Peck was allowed downstairs that week but he made the trip only once a day. He was still tired in the evenings from the exertion. A walking cast had been put on his leg and his arm was in a soft padded sling. It allowed more mobility, but it was still awkward to negotiate the steps. And, as difficult as it was for him to admit it, he realized that he hadn't been in tiptop shape when he'd had the wreck. But almost a month of healthy meals and rest had him feeling much better.

He was lounging on the battered sofa one evening when Emily came down dressed in one of her business suits for a

meeting.

"Chad's going to come stay this evening, Peck," she noted.

"I'm not a child, don't you think I could stay alone for once?" he asked with rancor, not taking his eyes off the television.

"We've been over this a thousand times. What if you fell and no one's here? You're not too stable going up and down the steps, you know!"

"I haven't fallen yet."

"You're acting childish. When Chad comes, you talk about Sadler and Sons and he tells you what's going on. I thought you enjoyed that," she said quickly. "I guess I was mistaken."

"I guess you were."

Chad knocked on the door at that moment and the discussion ended. Emily was running late, so she said a quick "Hello and good-bye" to Chad and nothing to Peck. But she steamed all the way to the meeting.

How could you love a man who blew hot and cold in a matter of minutes? When she'd gone upstairs to get dressed, he'd been fine. Then he'd been angry when she'd come back down again. What had gotten into him? They'd had a lovely dinner, talking and laughing, teasing each other, talking about the food business, the food show. What had gone wrong? She didn't have time to dwell on it. Maybe he was just tired.

---

It was a pleasant summer evening and Chad asked Peck if he wanted to go sit on the porch. Peck declined, saying he was going up to bed. He made no apologies to Chad, who'd come prepared to go over some business.

Slowly, Peck lumbered his way up the stairs, peeled off his clothing and the sling from his arm, refusing to exert any more energy by putting on his pajama bottoms. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the carefully covered plate of chocolate

chip cookies and the thermos of cold milk Emily left for him each evening she was out. If she were here, she'd have brought them to me and shared them, he thought.

He sat back on the stacked pillows and looked around the room. Everything neat and clean. Orderly. Clean pajamas laid on the end of the bed. Fresh bed. No Emily.

What the hell is wrong with me? I've spent practically every night of my life in this room. Tonight is no different.

After reading for a while, he looked at the luminous dial on his bedside clock again. Ten-thirty. She'd never been this late before. He turned out the light, jammed the pillows again and settled with his back to the clock. Then flipped over. Ten forty-five. Where was she? What did he care?

It was close to midnight when he heard the front door close and Emily's footsteps on the stairtreads. Would she look in on him? Probably not. She didn't have any reason to. He certainly had been rude enough to her this evening. She was probably still angry with him.

He was right. She went directly to her room. In a few minutes he heard the door open again and heard her pad barefoot to the bathroom. Peck was watching the doorway when she passed his room. The light from the hallway outlined her petite figure ideally. A slim, smooth thigh peeked out of an elongated slit in the short blue satin nightgown. Lace edged the low-cut neckline and fell over firm, soft breasts. Her short blond hair gleamed from the overhead light.

She hesitated momentarily as she lifted one delicate arm to shut off the hall light. Then all was in darkness and she was gone.

Suddenly, everything was crystal clear to Peck. Why he'd been angry with Emily this evening, why he hadn't wanted to talk with Chad, why the room hadn't suited him, why he was so anxious for her to

come home. Come home. Operative words. Suggestive words. Nice words.

The image of her in the lacy blue gown slammed into his mind. And stayed. He moaned in frustration, not cognizant that he'd uttered a sound.

He smelled her fragrance before he realized she was in the room. "Peck?" she whispered. Maybe if he didn't answer, she'd go away and leave him in his misery. But she didn't.

Emily didn't like the moan she'd heard from Peck. When he didn't answer, she sat next to his hip on the side of the bed and put her hand on his face.

"Peck?" she repeated softly.

Of its own volition, his arm went around her waist and he pulled her forward against his body. His right arm held her pinned against him as his mouth sought hers. Soft palms splayed across his furry chest as their lips met in a searing kiss. Hunger and desire, fueled by pent-up emotions, clamored for assuagement.

Neither of them spoke. Not a sound was uttered as they exchanged kisses and caresses. Hot, fevered breathing abounded as they shifted in the bed until their bodies were flush. Peck's free hand roamed over her back, sliding sensuously on the satin material. Her hands touched, kneaded, smoothed the bunched muscles of his upper arms, then traipsed a path over his shoulders and chest.

Greedy tongues and lips nibbled, met, tasted and returned for more. One silky leg slid between two hair roughened thighs and insinuated itself against his aroused manhood. Emily's soft gasp was swallowed by a probing kiss.

Mews of pleasure filled the silence of the room when Peck's fingers, then mouth, found the peaked buds of her breasts. The satin and lace were moist from his arduous attention long before his hand skimmed up her sleek legs, outlined the full swell of her hip, then planed

across her flat tummy to grasp the engorged mound in his palm. The little nothing of her gown inched along with his hand, and in a quick motion it was whisked over her head and thrown over the edge of the bed to puddle in a satin mass on the floor.

Peck's sharp intake of breath at the wonder he held in his hand was the only sound in the room. He kissed; he caressed; she responded with tender touches of her own. Hands skimmed as the fires built. Only complete union would appease the crescendo that raged between them.

But it was a long time in coming. In times past, Peck had never considered the obligation, the responsibility of loving a woman. He'd taken his own satisfaction, giving little in return. Although his senses were keyed to an all time high, he wanted more this time. He wanted Emily to come alive in his arms. He wanted a slow ascension of passion, not the fevered rush he'd experienced before. Her enjoyment—her pleasure—was tantamount in his mind.

The wonder, the pleasure of each other absorbed them. Skin had never felt so good, kisses had never been so passionate, touch and texture never created such awareness for either of them. It was a new world, one they'd never traversed before.

When passion and anticipation could be delayed no longer, Peck eased her body on top of his and slowly, so slowly, made them one. Emily's gasp at his possession was swallowed by his open kiss, then waves of pleasure suffused them until they'd slaked the burning desires and given each other a part of themselves.

Warm, damp limbs blended into one as Peck curled her into the curve of his body and circled her with his arms. With a contented sigh, Emily drifted off to sleep, as did Peck.

Not a word had been spoken.

Emily awoke at two a.m. wondering what had disturbed her. She was startled in the darkness when she realized where she was and with whom. The cast on Peck's leg had grazed her calf when he'd shifted in his sleep.

Memories of their lovemaking flooded her mind. At first she smiled, then the look turned to a frown. What had come over her to carry on like that with him? What would they say to each other in the morning?

It was impossible to conjure up rational thought with his warm body up against hers and his arm holding her tight against his chest. He moaned slightly when she moved but she pulled the covers up around him so that he wouldn't notice the absence of her body heat. As quietly as possible she fled from the room on bare feet.

Even a cup of steaming coffee didn't make her feel any better. Last night had been a mistake, a pure, unadulterated mistake.

Peck was a man, with all the normal urges and. . . well, he was a man, that about covered it. And she was the only available port in a storm. He'd been confined. The very fact that he hadn't said one word last night was indicative of something. But what? Dammit, she wished she'd had more experience with men.

It wasn't that she was a prude, or that she was so archaic as to keep herself pure for marriage, but more that she'd never wanted to have an intimate relationship with a man before. So why had last night been different?

Because you're in love with Peck Sadler, stupid, she told herself.

It was almost three when she formulated her plan of action. The month was practically over, Peck was mobile, sort of, and she would be leaving in two days anyhow. While he couldn't go back to work

for another two weeks, he could take care of himself. The nurse no longer had to come bathe him, and he'd just have to let his beard grow. She smiled when she thought of all the conversations they'd had while she shaved him each morning.

But back to the problem at hand. She checked all the supplies in the kitchen, then made a store list. Quietly going upstairs she put on jeans and a top and left to go to an all night grocery store. Back by four o'clock, she whizzed around the kitchen making casseroles, preparing main dishes, parboiling vegetables and packaging everything neatly in Ziploc bags, labeling as she went.

By eight o'clock, she'd completed almost two weeks worth of meals and itemized everything on a legal pad. She gathered her clothing, her house plants and all her information about the food show. It took five trips to the car to get all her possessions loaded.

If tears stung her eyes as she drove away from the house, she ignored them.

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Peck awakened with a smile on his face and felt like a million dollars until he realized he was alone. The pervasive sweet smell of Emily lingered on his pillow. Propping himself on his good arm, preparatory to getting out of bed, his eyes lit on the blue satin gown lying on the floor. Another smile surfaced.

It was late, after ten, by the time he finished washing and put on some clothes. Using his crutch, he descended the steps in search of Emily. They had talking to do.

But the house was silent, too quiet. Going from room to room on the lower story, he couldn't find a trace of her. But he spotted the note on the kitchen table quickly. A long letter, it actually was, with detailed instructions about various food that had been prepared, labeled, and placed in the freezer. In her usual orderly manner, she'd left nothing to his imagination. The en-

trees were numbered, all twelve of them, with explicit directions about how to defrost and reheat.

She'd inventoried all the drinks in the house, told him where cookies and cakes were and even left the name and phone number of a cleaning service if he needed it.

Peck stared at the three page letter. Not a word about last night. Nothing about where she was. When she'd be back. Suddenly it struck him: she wasn't coming back. Not ever. An earthshaking loneliness overtook him, a feeling he hadn't had in fourteen years. After the lethargy passed, he went back upstairs to her room. Nothing of hers remained. The bed was made, the closet empty.

It was as if she'd never been there.

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Peck's life fell into another regular pattern. A therapist came to exercise his arm every day. Chad came to the house to tell him about the business. Mrs. Brown phoned with information about calls he'd received and filled him in on the plans for the food show, frequently mentioning Emily's name. Everything was running according to schedule.

Everything except the gut-wrenching feelings he had when he was alone. With every bite of the tasty meals Emily'd prepared, Peck wanted her there to share them with him. When he lay sleepless in his bed he wondered how the passion of just one night with her could have made such a difference.

He replayed that conversation he'd overheard between Emily and Mrs. Brown a thousand times. But in the light of what had happened, nothing now made sense. If she was going to make a play for him, why had she left?

Surely sharing his bed would constitute forcing his hand. Wouldn't it? It had been obvious that she wasn't in the habit of giving herself to men. Although he'd had

scant experience, he knew he'd been the first. Why hadn't she contacted him? It was painfully apparent she was avoiding him. Art Farell now came to the house to let him know what was going on in the marketing department.

After a week, Peck simply couldn't stand it. She either had to apologize to him or he had to apologize to her. The loneliness was driving him crazy. So when Chad took him to the hospital to have the casts removed, Peck had him drop him off at the River Ridge Business Park. It was time for a showdown although Peck had no idea what he'd say when he confronted Emily.

Cloe looked up when he came in. "Well, hi, stranger," she said cheerfully. "Where's Emily?" he cut her off.

"In her office. I'll tell her you're here." She reached for the intercom.

"I'll announce myself." Still on crutches, he haltingly walked to the closed door, then opened it abruptly.

Emily looked up at the intrusion. "Hello, Peck," she said businesslike.

He slammed the door behind him.

"Just what the hell is going on here?" he asked angrily.

"You'll have to give me more information than that. This is a business office and we're conducting the business of being food distributors, as far as I know," she answered without her facial expression changing.

"Why did you leave my house?"

"It was time. The month was up. You were able to take care of yourself."

"It should please you immensely that I'm here."

"Why?"

"Because you've won." He thought he'd never seen her look more beautiful than she did now, seated behind the large desk, dressed in a tailored suit with a nonsense blouse.

A puzzled look crossed her face. "Won



what?"

"Don't be coy, Emily. Me! You've won me! Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about!"

"That concussion must have scrambled your brain, Peck. I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about," she retaliated.

"You were quick to volunteer to come to my house and ingratiate yourself so that I would find it impossible to live without you." The startled look on her face made him continue.

"Even though I knew what you were doing, I succumbed to your charms anyway. That ought to please you. You seduced me with fabulous meals, spoiled me with cookies, appealed to everything masculine about me with your gentle touch and kindness. And as a final measure, you shared my bed."

Emily was so surprised at his words that she was speechless. She stood up and stared at him.

"I fell for it, Emily, hook, line and sinker. You can have Sadler and Sons, run it any way you want, just like you planned. Have your little food shows expand the markets, advertise to your heart's delight." He glared at her, anger warring with the love he felt welling up inside him.

"Fell for what? Whatever made you think I want to run Sadler and Sons? I don't know what you're talking about, Peck, honestly I don't."

Through gritted teeth, he said, "I overheard your conversation with Mrs. Brown, Emily. About how I didn't know diddly about advertising and if you ran the company you could do three times the business. How you ought to make yourself indispensable—I believe that was your word—to me, get me to marry you . . ." His voice trailed off. He ran his fingers over his face. "Well, you succeeded, I'm hooked." His voice held defeat and

his eyes were downcast. Almost as a second thought, he added, "I'm not as rich as you seem to think, however, even though my brothers did turn over the business to me."

The light dawned. Emily grinned, but she composed her face before he could look up and catch her at it. She recalled her thoughts the morning after she'd spent the night in his arms. She'd questioned his motives then, was now any different? Was he just doing the right thing once again, as he had with his brothers? Was he being noble? She had to know for sure.

"I still don't understand, Peck," she said smoothly.

Without looking at her, he turned his back. "It's fairly simple it seems to me, Emily. You showed me the sweet advantages of having you in the house. I *like* living in a clean house and eating well." In a voice that was almost a whisper, he continued, "I was jealous as hell of Chad when you spent time with him and even resented the time you were away from me at those women's meetings." He paused again then threw his right hand into the air in a frustrated gesture. "Having you snuggled in my arms, in my bed, was the best feeling I'd ever had in my life."

Emily couldn't let him continue. He was in agony explaining all this to her.

"Then you've changed your opinion about me, have you? You've realized I'm a woman now because I put on perfume, and provided clean laundry and cooked. Yes, that's it. I can cook, one of your major qualifications for womanhood, I believe."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He raised angry eyes at her as he turned around on his crutches.

"In your dark and *silent*, I might add, bedroom, you don't care if I have legs like stumps or that I'm called "Old Iron-pants"?"

"I never said that about you! You've got

gorgeous legs."

"You said the men in the warehouse called me that. And you said that I probably couldn't cook and I wasn't very feminine. I guess I should take it as a compliment that you said I knew the food business thoroughly."

Peck remembered the conversation with Chad. "We weren't talking about you, Emily. We were talking about one of the reps from Federal Foods, Amy Fields. Don't jump to conclusions about something you overheard."

"I might give you the same advice. What you eavesdropped on between me and Mrs. Brown was a conversation about Stan Owens, the editor of the newspaper."

Peck knew who she was talking about. He knew Stan, knew that his father died and he'd inherited a great deal of money. Also knew he was a bachelor, and from a woman's point of view, probably was not bad looking, either. It all fit. Had he misjudged her all along?

"Then I wasn't a hunted man? You didn't want to marry me so you could run Sadler and Sons?"

"No."

Silence hung between them, neither of them willing to make the first move.

"Why did you leave?" he asked quietly.

It was time for truth. "I thought if I would be embarrassing the next morning and I didn't know how to handle it. I figured you were just lonely . . . and . . . and . . ." She turned her back to him. Tears were surfacing. "I'll resign if you like."

"What I'd like is for you to marry me."

"Wh . . . why?"

Peck grinned at her stiffened back. They were going to make it, he just knew. "For all the usual reasons. I need someone to keep house for me, cook my meals, do laundry, that sort of thing. Interested?"

Silently, she shook her head.

"Then how about I love you, more than I can tell you. You've become such a mar-

velous part of my life I wonder how I existed without you. You erase all the loneliness I've ever had. I love you, Emily, truly I do."

She turned and looked at the welcoming smile on his face. "Really?" she whispered.

"Really," he breathed and leaned against her desk to support himself. He opened his arms. "Come here."

Emily didn't hesitate. She flew around her desk and into his waiting embrace. He encircled her and buried his face into the crook of her neck, all the while caressing her back and touching her hair gently. They kissed, letting their lips seal the bargain.

"I love you, Gregory Peck Sadler," she said when they surfaced for breath.

"Shhh . . . don't let anyone hear you say that. I've managed to keep it from everyone who works for me . . . us," he added confidently. "You can run this business, it won't bother me. I like to work the warehouse."

Emily shook her head, but her eyes were dancing as she looked at him. "For a while maybe, but I have other plans."

"Yeah, like what?" His arms tightened around her. Any plans she had were going to include him.

Her face clouded suddenly as she realized that he had already raised a family of boys—perhaps he didn't want a family. Tentatively she said, "I think it'd be nice to change the name of the company to Sadler and Sons and Daughters, but perhaps you don't want that . . . ?"

Peck knew instantly what she was thinking and that she was offering him an out if he wanted it.

"Daughters? As in baby girls?"

"Yep," she said teasingly. "How does the name Whoopi Goldberg Sadler strike you?"

"Suits me fine," Peck smiled. ♥



# *A Matter of Magic*

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*When the handsome man she'd crashed into produced a rose from thin air, talent agent Georgette Finlay was sure she'd found the magician she'd been seeking! Georgette had always avoided romance with her clients, but Murray Richard's caresses worked a sensual magic she couldn't resist.*

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LINDA HAMPTON

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Georgette had no warning. Her collision with what felt like a brick wall blurred her perception. As the packages flew crazily from her arms, she felt two strong hands seize her. Male hands. Definitely.

From instinct she grasped the masculine forearms to keep from sprawling on the sidewalk amid her scattered purchases. She was right. He did feel like a brick wall. As she was deciding the guy must lift weights for a living, he came into

focus. And he didn't look at all like Charles Atlas.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm so sorry—"

"My fault entirely."

"No, no, really—"

He was not the Charles Atlas type. More in the line of a Clark Kent somewhere between the phone booth and the cape. Longish-faced, hollow-cheeked, square-chinned. And blue eyes that twinkled with something that didn't fit the

stolid, three-piece black suit under the also-very-businesslike black overcoat. The only thing that broke the austere impression was the red-plaid muffler that flirted whimsically with the cold December wind tunneling through the tall buildings of downtown St. Louis.

She muttered another apology and bent to retrieve the boxes that had spilled from her grasp, aware of the other shoppers sidestepping the mess as they shuffled past in both directions.

"I hope you didn't have anything breakable in these." His slightly husky voice brought her head up, to find him squatting nearby, extending two small packages to her. She took the unwrapped Christmas gifts without looking directly at them.

"No, fortunately."

"Do you have far to go with these?"

He was still handing her packages. When would she learn? She should have split up her list instead of trying to get so much done in one trip.

"About two feet behind you." She watched him turn to the metered parking spaces running parallel to the sidewalk. "The red car."

"Why don't you just unlock the car and hand them in instead of trying to hold them all?"

Of course. How practical. She hated "practical"—when she didn't think of it first.

"Good idea." She stood and juggled her load to search for the keys nestled somewhere in the purse slung over her shoulder. With the barest smile, he took the bulk of the packages from her arms.

A dimple? Yes. Just one. About an inch from the corner of his mouth, tucked into a cheek that had a faint tan. Absurd that he would have a suntan. The city was blanketed with snow.

She looked away and unlocked the car. One at a time he passed the boxes and bags to her, relay fashion. When she was sure

there couldn't be more than one last handful, she straightened with a "thank you" at the ready.

And instead of packages he gave her—from thin air, with a smooth sweep of his hand—a single, long-stemmed rose.

Georgette forgot to thank him. She stared open-mouthed as he bowed graciously, his dimple deepening ever so slightly, and turned and strode away. But her astonishment shared space with calculation.

"Wait!" She started after him, remembered her open car door, and turned back to lock it. By the time her gaze had latched on to him again, he'd gained almost a block on her. She took off in hot pursuit, the rose clutched in her hand.

"Wait! Sir!" She had to have him. He would be a perfect addition to her stable—just what she'd been looking for. "Please, sir."

She ignored the curious looks of the pedestrians she sped past, swerving between them to catch up with the black overcoat she was after. With a last burst of energy she closed on him and caught the end of the red-plaid muffler that danced over his shoulder.

She hadn't intended to choke him.

He came to an abrupt halt, his hand going to his throat to ease the cinch on the scarf as she circled to stop in front of him. The surprise on his face softened to narrow amusement. But not enough to dent that little place in his cheek, Georgette noticed.

"How did you do that?" she asked breathlessly. She held the rose up between them and, before he could answer, rushed on. "Do it again."

His dimple appeared at the same time that his brows rose.

"Sorry. I'm fresh out."

"Of roses?" She was catching her breath. "Then do something else." Her mind raced to a solution. "Take your shirt

off without removing your coat."

This time he laughed. He threw his head back and laughed, the lyrical chuckle warming her from the inside out. Georgette felt her smile before she knew she was going to have one.

"It's twenty degrees out here!" he protested.

"Well, you think of something. You are a magician, aren't you?"

The humor that creased his face diminished to a half-smile that still showed white teeth against the backdrop of his tan face.

"No," he said simply. "I'm in insurance."

"What's your name?"

He hesitated briefly, assessed her.

"Murray Richards."

"Murray," she said musingly, a sparkle laying claim to her eyes. "Murray the Magician. I love it! It alliterates!"

"I told you—"

"You're in insurance. I know." Georgette's hand dove into her purse. "I don't suppose you'd confess to people you . . . bump into on the street." The search in her bag produced her business card. She handed it to Murray. "But you bumped into the right person. I can put you to good use."

She watched his face as he read the card. She hadn't expected him to frown.

"A talent agency? You want me to—"

"I can book you solid. I haven't had a magician since Harry humiliated himself doing a disappearing act. Most of the magicians in the city are too independent." Her eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. "You aren't one of those, are you?"

His smile was back. It even extended to his eyes.

"No. I'm not one of those. I'm in insurance," he said patiently.

"But you just pulled a rose out of thin air."

"One trick does not a magician make."

Now she frowned.

"You mean I've just seen your entire repertoire?"

"Well . . ." He deferred his answer, shifting his weight to one leg in a stance of indulgence.

"You do know more," she concluded, ignoring the appreciative look he ran over her.

"I know your nose is turning as red as mine feels. Would you allow me"—he glanced at the card he still held—"Ms. Finlay, to buy you a cup of coffee?"

"Georgette. You may call me Georgette, and"—what the hell?—"I'd love a cup of coffee."

Murray steered her confidently to the closest coffee shop. They didn't have far to go. They were standing in front of it.

Inside, declining Murray's offer to take her coat, Georgette huddled into a banquette and watched him remove his topcoat. She didn't realize she was staring, until Murray lowered himself to the banquette across from her, forcing her gaze to follow. She made a swift transition.

"Now." She wanted to launch her plan immediately.

"Have you had lunch? The broiled trout is quite good here."

"Just coffee, thanks. Black."

Georgette took a breath and opened her mouth to get to the point. And a waitress appeared with her ticket pad. Georgette closed her mouth. She waited while Murray ordered two coffees and, when the yellow-aproned girl was gone, tried again.

"What kind of show can you put on? A few parlor tricks mixed with some grand-scale illusions usually work best, I think. They make for good pacing."

"Pacing is important," Murray said quite seriously. His brow even furrowed a little.

And Georgette read him like a book. She sighed and began slowly to work her

gloves off, a finger at a time.

"You're not taking me at all seriously, are you?"

"How can I take seriously such an outrageous suggestion? A public performance." His laugh sounded more like a snort than he'd intended. "I am not—"

"You are a magician, unless you deliberately misled me. And I don't think you did. You're just being modest. But the idea intrigues you, or you wouldn't have bothered to buy me coffee."

Oh, he was intrigued, all right. But not by the idea of performing. Well, a little if he was honest. But by no stretch of the imagination would he allow an occasional private fantasy to manifest itself publicly. What interested him was the way Georgette Finlay's mouth worked. The way it fit just so under her nose. Her nose interested him, too. He had a definite eye for noses, and hers was one of the best he'd seen.

"I work for a large, prestigious insurance firm, all modesty aside."

"You wouldn't have to give that up. I have a lot of part-timers on my client list."

"Give up?" he repeated, low and to himself. He tried not to laugh, but the smile wouldn't contain his amusement. He compromised on a dry chuckle. One hardly "gave up" a financial vice-presidency for a firm like Masters. One would never work in the field again! Bringing himself back to her, Murray sobered somewhat. "There is no question about my trading one career for another. The point is . . . a man in my position . . ."

"A man in your position?" Georgette prompted.

"My boss would frown on it."

"He doesn't want you moonlighting?"

"Uh . . . that's not exactly the problem."

"Then what is?"

"Company image," Murray said.

"Oh." Georgette sniffed the word and

flipped her hand in blithe dismissal. "Then there's no problem. We just bill you under a stage name, do you up in a disguise your mother couldn't see through, and—"

"Tell me something about this business of yours," Murray directed, not wanting to bring the conversation to an end so soon by rejecting her proposal.

"Of course. You're entitled to know you'll be dealing with a reputable, licensed—"

"That's not what I meant," Murray interrupted, unable to contain a grin. She was serious about this. "What do you do, exactly?"

"Oh. Well, I arrange bookings for entertainers. Musicians and vocalists for clubs, concerts, whatever. And I represent several models who do everything from fashion shows to layouts to television commercials. I arrange entertainment for parties, too. All kinds. Jugglers, acrobats, clowns. We even do singing telegrams." She said the last with a pert smile that brought Murray out of his distracted fascination with her lower lip.

"Interesting." He propped his chin on his thumb, index finger on his upper lip, as casually as he could. "Sounds like you represent every possible source of talent anyone could ask for."

"Except, alas, a magician."

"Ah, yes. Harry." Murray stroked the corners of his mouth with thumb and forefinger in a pensive gesture. Actually, it was to keep from frowning. She had come full circle on him again.

"Harry wasn't too smooth," she admitted wryly, then brightened as she smiled across at him. "But you. That rose trick was as slick as anything I've seen by the best professionals. You'll be—"

"You're forgetting one small thing," Murray interrupted. "I'm not a performer."

"You know some tricks, don't tell me



you don't. Who have you done them for? Family? Friends? All you have to—"

"Wait! Wait!" Murray put up both hands to stop her barrage. "I know a few. But I've only entertained a niece or nephew occasionally. And in the most informal way. I'm not sure I can do anything suitable for a stage."

He was doing better, he decided. There was a sharp look of interest on her face. And he was beginning to get an idea.

"Will you audition for me?" Georgette asked, a marked lack of aggression in her voice. And the smile she turned on him would have melted the coldest heart.

"Why not?"

"Good. My office hours are on the card I gave you. If you need to arrange another time, call me and I'll set up an appointment."

"Your office." He smiled. It wasn't what he had in mind, but it was a starting place.

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Murray. The name rolled through Georgette's mind as easily as it played on her tongue. She wondered if she'd ever see him again. She had wondered every other minute since Saturday if she'd ever see him again. A little magic would be welcome right now.

It was Monday, and the end of a long, chaotic day. Grateful that the phone would be answered by the service now that it was after five, Georgette did her best to relax the muscles in her back, stretching her arms to the far side of her desk with her face down on her blotter.

"Does coddling your clients always affect you so adversely?"

Georgette's head flew up at the sound of Murray's voice.

"Murray." It was an unnecessary thing to say, but she'd found she liked the feel of his name rolling off her tongue.

"It seems to have taken a lot out of you." There was a bewildered teasing in

the tone of his voice.

"The *day* has taken a lot out of me," Georgette sighed.

"I should have called first," he said.

"Are you up to an audition?"

Was there just a hint of hope in his voice?

"Absolutely." She stood and walked around her desk, crossing her arms to lean against its front expectantly.

"Here?" Murray acted as if he hadn't been prepared to actually go through with the display.

"No." Georgette straightened. "There's a low platform in the studio next door. Closest I can come to a stage."

She led him to the empty studio and stood waiting for him to mount the stage. But he remained close—too close—beside her.

"So, where do you want to start?" she asked.

"How about starting here?" Murray's voice was low, mesmerizing, as his hand lifted toward her hair. She took a startled breath. But before she could even flinch, his hand was in front of her again, holding a small rubber ball. As she watched, slack-mouthed, the ball became two, then three, then. . . . She lost count as Murray's fingers rolled the balls back and forth. Her mouth stretched into a pleased smile as he turned and stepped on stage.

She followed his movements with mild fascination as he performed a series of illusions, then her gaze wandered from Murray's long, graceful fingers to his face. His generous mouth was relaxed with confidence, taking some of the squareness from the line of his jaw. The blue of his eyes seemed bluer somehow, lit with pleasure. He was enjoying himself. Georgette smiled at the knowledge. It was obvious, not only from his expression but from the expert performance of his tricks, that he was as fascinated by his play as she was. There would be no prob-

lem convincing him to sign with her. He was a natural.

"Enough?" he asked suddenly, snapping the knot from a handkerchief he'd tied in the same way—with a snap through the air.

"Enough parlor tricks. But . . ."

"But I'll bet you want to see something 'grander'" Murray paused and smiled mischievously. "There is something I'd like to try, not too flashy, but I'll need a volunteer from the audience to assist me."

Georgette looked innocently over one shoulder, then the other, before looking back to Murray to turn her hands up in a gesture of acceptance. She walked to the platform and stepped up before him. He handed her the kerchief and held his hands out in front of her, palm to palm.

"Tie my wrists together with that as securely as you can."

Georgette looped the white cloth around his arms.

"Take that rope I used awhile ago . . . on the chair." His voice was quiet and husky, as if he were telling a secret. "Put one end between my arms, behind the cloth. . . . Now take both ends in your hands and step back until the rope is taut. If you tug on the rope when I tell you, it will pass through the handkerchief . . . solid through solid. . . ." His eyes captured hers, and she couldn't look away. "Now, jerk the rope hard."

She did. And the rope came free in her hands, tipping her balance. Her gaze fell to the cloth still tied around his wrists.

"You may examine the handkerchief." He said it with a note of challenge, more in his eyes than in his voice. His eyes dared her to come close as he held his hands out for her inspection.

Still holding the rope, she stepped to him, her gaze on the knot she had tied. She followed the arc of his hands as they lifted slowly to her face. He then framed her face in his palms. Georgette couldn't

offer the protest she knew she should. She just stared at his mouth, her own lips parting with sensual relish.

But something like panic filtered its way into her mind. She couldn't do this. It was unprofessional. Georgette firmed her mouth and swallowed. And Murray, as though he'd seen the change, lowered his hands. The sensuous line of his mouth edged toward a knowing grin.

"You can untie me now." His voice sounded hoarse in the quiet space between them. But the light in his eyes teased life into hers.

"Mmmm." Georgette pretended to debate her an answer. "You're a magician. Can't you get out of a simple knot?"

For an answer, Murray narrowed his eyes at her. But before she could determine whether or not to help him, he twisted his hands downward and brought them up holding the white cloth, freed of its hold.

"See? You don't need me at all."

Murray brushed the handkerchief across her cheek, his expression softening as he gazed down at her. When he spoke, his voice was so low that he could have been talking to himself.

"I think maybe I do."

Georgette chose to believe that he was referring to the bookings she could provide. She couldn't let herself think that the look in his eyes was the caress it seemed to be.

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Murray hid his errant thoughts behind his best professional face, forcing himself to concentrate on what Mr. Masters was saying.

Uneasiness made him straighten in the brown leather wing chair that faced the chief executive officer.

Murray hoped to high heaven that Masters couldn't detect his impatience to get to Georgette. Or the frustration that caused the impatience. He'd meant to give

it a few days before he saw her again. But life was too short, and two days was all he could stand. But how much longer could he use delaying tactics? He hadn't yet admitted to Georgette that he could never perform. He only wished that he could find a way to get her mind off business and on him.

Murray cleared his throat to get his mind on business when Masters paused to steeple his fingers in front of his face, elbows on the arms of his chair. The subject of Ron Jefferson's being up for promotion had not entirely escaped Murray's attention, so he was ready when the older man spoke again.

"What is your opinion?" Mr. Masters asked in his slow, sandpaper voice.

"Well." Murray knew it was going to sound self-righteous to his own ears. "You're aware that Jefferson has made quite a name for himself on the weekend stock-car racing circuit."

"Yes." Masters lowered his hands, looking intently at Murray without revealing a trace of emotion. "Do you find that objectionable?"

"Personally, no." Murray weighed his words. "But we're talking about a vice-presidency. A more visible position. Credibility should be taken into consideration."

"Mm," Masters murmured, still looking at Murray. "What about his other qualifications?"

"Jefferson's qualifications are unquestionable."

"Yes," Masters said, as if it were a foregone conclusion. "So it's just the matter of 'credibility' to be considered."

As Masters softly enunciated each syllable of "credibility," Murray had a vision of himself in a Houdini getup onstage before thousands of spectators. He barely managed not to squirm under Masters's continued stare.

Finally, the audience with Masters at an

end, Murray left the comfortable austerity of the walnut-and-leather office. He was very much aware that he carried with him the reputation of the insurance firm founded by Masters's grandfather. It was inescapable.

Georgette's teeth pressed a thoughtful pattern into her lower lip. How could she do it? How could she weaken Murray's resistance? But maybe the request itself would be all the persuasion she'd need. Mothers against drunk driving was a worthy cause.

She let her hand slide from the phone receiver. And tuned in on the diminishing flurry of activity in her office that she'd tuned out—countless times since the call from MADD that morning—so she could think. That she'd ask Murray to perform for them was not in question. It was how to go about it that had her worried. He was so evasive.

At the moment, a tall, elegant man materialized in the open office doorway.

"Murray!" Georgette felt inexplicable heat rise up her neck to her face. She'd tried all day to think of a way to approach him. And there he stood, as if he'd just appeared in a poof of smoke. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you to dinner. Before, after, or in between wherever else you have to go this evening," he added quickly.

How presumptuous of him! She stood and crossed her arms, her Who-do-you-think-you-are? speech at the ready.

It was the shadow of uncertainty in his eyes that saved him.

Georgette felt herself soften helplessly. She relaxed her arms from their rigid breast-high perch to a looser clasp in front of her waist. What the hell was she thinking, anyway? She needed to talk to him, didn't she? And he must have come here for the same reason. Georgette inhaled.

Not as decisively as she'd intended. "I was about to call it a day anyway, and I have something to discuss with you."

The barest tick showed itself at the end of Murray's eyebrow before he said, "I'll follow while you take your car home. Then we won't have to bring you back here to get it."

"It would be much simpler to go from here."

"I'd rather see you safely home."

"I get home safely every night by myself. Why should tonight be any different?"

"Because tonight you're my date."

Georgette balked at the word.

"Murray, this is a business—"

"Business, business." Murray's sigh was impatient. "Look, just pretend you like me. It would do me a world of good."

"Well, I'll have to work on that." Or work against it, she thought, as she turned to pull her car keys from her purse.

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The lights along the pier threw dancing streaks of gold across the Mississippi River. But their sparkling iridescence didn't compare to the spears of sensation Georgette felt when Murray's arm went around her, pulled her snug against his side as they walked toward the gaily lit steamboat at the pier's end.

As Murray escorted her into the lower level of the permanently moored steamboat, mellow strains of jazz added another kind of warmth to the heated interior of the restaurant. Georgette felt it seep into her like a caress as she was seated in the candle-glow of the brass lamp on the table for two. When Murray lowered himself across from her, she risked looking directly at him for the first time since they'd left her office.

"The specialty here is seafood." Murray's voice had an intimate resonance not in keeping with the urbanity of his words.

"Sounds wonderful." Georgette chose a

dish and ordered, but food wasn't on her mind. Unfortunately, neither was the business she'd told Murray she wanted to discuss with him. But she could fix that. She cleared her throat and looked straight at Murray before she spoke. And was appalled to hear herself ask, "Do you spend a lot of time under a sun lamp?"

Slow wonder altered the lines of Murray's face before a low chuckle floated across the table to Georgette. She felt the regretful part of her lips turn to a curve and forgive herself.

"No. I just returned from the Cayman Islands last week." Murray leaned forward. He looked so pleased, so attentive that Georgette found herself prompting him. And answering him when he turned the tables. And not really regretting the exchange, despite the fact that she was here to talk business.

She learned that he lived alone. In a house. With a yard. A curious thing for a single man, but he seemed oblivious to the need to justify it.

Their meals arrived and he told her that his parents, his sister and her husband and their two children all lived in the St. Louis area. He didn't have to tell her they were a close family.

"How old are your niece and nephew?" Well, she couldn't help herself. She might as well satisfy her curiosity about him.

"Three and four, respectively."

"Do you have other sisters or brothers?"

"No. Just the two of us." Murray bit into his food without volunteering more. When he'd swallowed, he turned the tables. "Now tell me about you. Are you from a large family?"

"I have a sister too." She didn't want to talk about her family life, but she answered his questions, leaving out as much as she could. The bland statement that her parents had divorced when she was a child didn't begin to express the hurt that rupture had caused, especially for her mother.

She told Murray that plans for a dancing career had led to the start of her business. But she didn't explain that a leg injury had destroyed the dream and robbed her of fulfilling the ambition inherited from her mother. Mention of her sister didn't reveal the loving and the fighting and now the distance that Georgette didn't know how to bridge. Everything she left out made her wonder what Murray wasn't telling her.

"I had a request today for a magician." Georgette said to change the topic of conversation to one that was less painful to her.

"I suppose it is your turn." Only a hint of disappointment in his voice. The barest sigh.

"My turn?" He'd lost her.

"I wanted to take you to dinner. You wanted to discuss business." Murray's look was calmly resigned.

"But I thought you wanted to take me to dinner because you wanted to discuss business." Bewilderment shaped her eyes.

"No," Murray said simply. "I only wanted to take you out."

Now, why the hell did she feel guilty? She had told him she had something to discuss with him! She might have assumed wrongly that he'd come to talk to her about performing, but she hadn't led him to believe that this was any more than a business meeting. Or had she? She decided to just plunge on.

"MADD wants a magician for a fundraising variety show they're sponsoring."

"MADD?"

"Mothers Against Drunk Driving," Georgette said quietly. She hadn't missed the shadow that crossed Murray's features.

"I know." For an instant Murray stared at Georgette without seeing her. He knew, all right. For the space of a breath, he was jerked back eight years. . . .

"The show is scheduled for mid-January," Georgette was saying. Murray heard the underlying tension of hope in her voice. "Do you think you could put together an act by then?"

"January," Murray repeated as if calculating the time. Damn. Stalling her before had been difficult. But his hesitation now had a different source. A tough one to cope with. How the hell could he say yes? But could he live with himself if he said no?

"That's about five weeks away, there'll be other entertainers, you know. And I think you could handle a twenty-minute slot without any trouble."

Murray couldn't help the slight smile that tipped the corner of his mouth. Of course she would think that. She was the only person he knew who possessed unbridled optimism. But it wouldn't be her neck on the line on that stage.

On the other hand, it could be.

"What's that look?" Georgette's voice betrayed her anxiety. "Have you decided to do it?"

"Oh, Georgette." The two words were spoken on a long sigh. "I'll have to think about it."

It was the most honest answer he'd given her in regard to his performing. He did think about it. All the way back to her apartment.

As Georgette fitted her key in her door, she felt Murray's chest lean into her back. The tension she'd felt since leaving the restaurant acted like a spring, and Georgette stepped inside and flipped on the entryway light. She faced Murray as he closed the door behind them.

She hadn't even intended to invite him in.

"Thank you for this evening," Murray's expressive eyes reinforced his words.

"I . . . think I'm supposed to thank you." She didn't recognize the voice that came from her throat. She stared up at the

smile that made Murray's face gentler, watched his broad square shoulders lift in a shrug.

"You're welcome. You could thank me a little more by not making me leave yet."

"Why?" she asked bluntly as Murray slipped out of his coat and reached past her to hang it carelessly on the closet knob. When he brought his hand back, he lifted it slowly to touch the hair near her cheek, so briefly, so lightly. Then the hand was before her. Holding one fresh daisy.

"I want to make sure this gets in water."

Without looking at him, she pivoted toward the living room, shrugged out of her coat, and tossed it on a chair as she passed through on her way to the kitchen.

"Would you like some coffee?" Georgette called loudly enough to be heard in the living room.

"Not really." The low, quiet answer came from directly behind her, stopping her breath in her lungs, turning her abruptly in its direction.

Murray stood with both hands in his trouser pockets, jacket flaps tucked back by his arms.

"A drink?" she asked uncertainly.

"No."

"A talk?" More uncertainty.

"Yes."

Yes. At this hour. In her apartment. Unorthodox, but if he wanted to talk. . . . Georgette put the daisy in a vase and then led Murray back to the sitting area, acknowledging the fact that theirs was an unorthodox situation. Nothing about them had been ordinary from the first moment they'd met. Their collision seemed to have set the tone for a rather bumpy relationship.

Georgette couldn't bear the tension. Sinking to a dove-gray chair, she wasted no time on preliminaries, though her voice was gentle when she spoke.

"Are you going to do it, Murray? The

MADD show?"

"On one condition."

Georgette stopped in the act of rising from the chair, her hands braced on its arms as she waited with unnamed dread for Murray to go on.

"You help me develop the act." A trace of the insistence with which he'd invited her to dinner was back in his voice. "Every magician has an assistant," he added with a grin.

Definitely impertinent.

Yet Georgette's heart pounded wildly at the prospect of the next best thing to watching a magic show: being part of one. She loved magic.

"I think I can arrange that," she said levelly as she stood. "We have about five weeks, so between evening sessions and weekends we should be able to work something up."

There was a sure pleasure in the angles of Murray's face as he moved close to her, his hands closing firmly on her upper arms.

An unreasonable flush skittered through her. Her hands instinctively lifted to his sides, and she raised her eyes to his.

"I'm sure we will." Murray's hoarse words whispered across her lips.

Will what? She had lost the thread of the conversation, didn't know what he was talking about. All she knew was the alluring shape of the mouth her gaze had returned to, that it was moving closer and losing focus.

"Murray . . ." His name was only a breath of protest. She felt it ricochet from his mouth back to hers before there was no longer any space for it to cross. His kiss was slow and gentle, but before it could deepen, she stepped back uncertainly.

"Murray, I can't . . . I don't . . ." A frustrated sigh punctuated Georgette's faltering speech. Under Murray's unwavering gaze, she seemed to force herself to be calm. "I don't get involved with my



clients. You're a client now."

"Only for one show."

Murray saw the flicker of an argument in Georgette's parted lips before she seemed to decide against it. "And we'll be working closely together in preparation for it." Georgette's tone, her look, said that surely he could see the point.

What he saw was hours spent with the woman he wanted to know better. Evenings, weekends. He'd find a way to make her forget this silly notion of not getting involved with him. He planned to get very involved with her. But he knew better than to press his luck at this stage.

"When do we start?" he asked cautiously. He tried to decide if it was relief he saw in Georgette. But her expression changed too soon to the down-to-business look he'd seen so often.

"We need to start right away." Her gaze was evasive. Not like her. "Tomorrow."

Murray couldn't help the slow stretch of his mouth. Tomorrow. Just what he'd wanted to hear. With deliberate propriety, he extended his hand to shake hers. And was glad hers was the only one that still trembled noticeably.

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It was the evening of Christmas day, and Georgette sat almost motionless on the floor before her fireplace listening to "The Nutcracker Suite." Her fingers toyed idly with a tree ornament as she stared pensively into the dying flames, still pondering the cryptic remark her mother had made. "There is more than one measure of success. I hope I haven't hampered your ability to see that."

She had spent a confusing Christmas day with her family. Her mother was involved with a man for the first time since her father had left, and Georgette was filled with envy. She was not sure whether she was envious of her mother's happiness or the attention stolen by Paxton Phelps, her mother's boyfriend. One thing was

definite, the day had left her with the blues.

Georgette's thoughts strayed without pause to Murray. They had been working closely for the past two weeks and whether she liked it or not, Georgette had to admit she was strongly attracted to him.

The doorbell clashed with the symphonic strains coming from the stereo and shattered Georgette's musings. Before she had time to consider who would be ringing her bell, she was looking up at a ruggedly handsome, cautiously cheerful Murray.

"Merry Christmas." He only moved his mouth. To smile.

Georgette's own mouth slowly gave way to do the same. She opened the door wider and stepped back to let him in out of the cold as she returned the greeting.

"Am I intruding?"

"Yes, fortunately."

Murray raised his brows, flicking a glance in the direction of the darkened living room before looking back at Georgette with a formidable hint of steel in his blue eyes.

"Want me to get rid of someone?"

"Old Man Melancholy." She didn't know how true it was until she'd said it.

"Feel like some company?" he asked.

Georgette only paused for effect. The answer was clear. Had been the moment she'd seen him on her threshold. Why she felt it was acceptable to want his company today, when she'd been keeping him at arm's length for the past two weeks, was as much a mystery to her as all the other unusual feelings she'd had that day.

"Yes." Georgette saw the hesitation leave Murray's eyes. "Let me take your coat."

She slipped the coat on a hanger and turned back to Murray, leading him to the living room with an unsteady but brave smile. As she moved to switch on another lamp, Murray stopped her.

"Let's light candles. It's more festive."

Candles it was. She rather liked the idea herself, and wondered why she hadn't thought of it when she'd put the *Nutcracker Suite* on continuous replay, made herself an eggnog, and built the fire in the fireplace.

"Where's your tree?" Murray asked.

"What do you call a Norfolk pine?"

Georgette looked at her adaptation to the right of the fireplace, its sparse limbs holding a few treasured glass ornaments from her childhood, and saw Murray follow her gaze.

"A houseplant," Murray declared. "Christmas trees are at least six feet tall and have lights and tinsel."

"Well. . . ." Georgette cast another glance at the pathetic pine. "Christmas isn't what it used to be."

"Is that what's got you down?"

Georgette shrugged lightly.

"I'm not down, really." She sure wasn't up, but why dwell on it? "Would you like some eggnog?"

"Do I get brandy in it?"

He got brandy in it. So did she.

"How was your day?" she asked when they were settled on the couch by the fire.

"Great." Murray's face lit with warmth. "Christmas is my favorite holiday. Good smells coming from the kitchen, turkey and all the trimmings. Utter chaos, with the whole family simultaneously tearing wrapping paper and exclaiming over presents, hugging and kissing."

"Christmas is for kids." Georgette spoke the oft-repeated phrase with a return of the melancholy she'd tried to banish.

"Not just for kids." His voice was quiet, reflective, as he held her gaze. "It's anyone who like to share happiness with the people they love."

Georgette looked away to the burning log, feeling like Scrooge for dampening the joy she'd seen in Murray's eyes.

"Did you have a nice visit with your family?" The look on his face told her he wasn't just being polite. She decided to confide in him.

"No. It was . . . uncomfortable."

At Murray's gentle prodding, Georgette told him of Paxton's presence, and confessed that she wasn't sure herself how she felt about her mother's being involved with a man.

"Hard to accept another man in your father's place?" Murray asked quietly.

"No, it isn't that. I was so young when my father left . . . I don't really have any memories of his relationship with Mom."

"No role model to compare Paxton to?"

"No role model to compare anyone to."

Georgette inspected the flecks of nutmeg in her eggnog. "We've been a strictly female family. I always thought that was the way Mom wanted it."

"Maybe she did as long as she was responsible for raising two daughters. A man in her life now won't interfere with that." Murray paused, looking intently at Georgette's worried frown. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle. "Don't you want her to be happy?"

"I don't want her to be hurt. After my father left—" Her words stopped in mid-breath, the vague remembrance fading in importance. She sighed. "Oh, I don't know, Murray. It'll just take some getting used to, I guess."

She leaned back against the sofa, silent and musing.

Murray watched closely the changes in Georgette's delicate features. She seemed about to speak. He was disappointed when she didn't, and even looked away from him.

He had hoped the conversation would provide a natural lead-in. To all the things he'd been wanting to say to her. But she seemed to have dropped the subject of family. Murray wasn't ready to do that.

"Have you ever considered marriage?"

Murray held his breath and hoped she would accept the question as casually as he'd tried to ask it.

"Not for myself." Georgette's smile was wry. She looked away to set her nog on the low table before meeting his gaze. "Have you?"

Murray kept his gaze locked with hers. "I've been married." His words rasped with emotion.

Without moving, Murray watched the shock that claimed her first. Then he strained to understand the expression that followed. She looked almost hurt.

"Are you divorced?" She never took her eyes from him, but her voice sounded far away.

"No. My wife died in an accident."

"I'm so sorry." Gentle compassion drew her brows together, changing the hurt. "A car accident?"

"Yes. The driver of the car that hit hers was drunk."

Murray watched the understanding that softened her eyes. He wouldn't have to explain why he'd agreed to do the MADD benefit.

"How awful for you," she said softly.

"It was over eight years ago, Georgette." Murray found a strange relief in telling her. He wanted her to understand that he'd come to terms with it. Wanted her to come to terms with it. "We'd only been married five months."

"Not long enough to have children?"

"My wife was six weeks pregnant when she died."

"Oh, Murray . . ." she whispered, her hand lifting from her lap, hesitating.

Murray ached with regret as he watched her return it to clasp her other hand in the hollow between her thighs.

"It's okay, Georgette," he said huskily. "It will never be a happy thought, but it's past."

Murray breathed a cautious sigh, glad he'd brought her closer to knowing him.

She needed time to digest what she'd just learned. He watched the workings of her mind in her unguarded expression.

Still, the sadness was in her eyes. Murray wanted happiness there. And the need to touch her was becoming desperate. He shifted away from her a little and slipped his hands between the cushions in the center of the couch behind her.

"Want to see some magic?" Murray's smile was easy because of the off-guard look on Georgette's face. He had gotten her attention. He kept it by apparently bringing a brightly wrapped box from behind her left ear, and he was pleased by her open-mouthed surprise.

"How did you do that?" Her eyes scanned his clothes, apparently for a large enough hiding place. "How did you sneak this in here?"

"I'm a magician. It was simple." Murray grinned at her. "I walked to the closet and got it out of my coat while you were getting the eggnog."

"Murray, you shouldn't have."

"Don't lecture me, Georgette." His voice was gentle. "Open it."

She opened the box. Her fingers slipped into the nest of tissue and made contact with the smooth surface of lead crystal. She gazed down at the oblong shape that rested in her palm, her eyes alight with pleasure.

"Oh, Murray . . ." she said on a breath of awe. "A hand cooler."

"A what?"

"Like the marble eggs Victorian ladies carried with them to tea parties." She lifted the crystal to press its coolness to her cheek, smiling softly at Murray. "In case of sudden flushes."

"Mmmm. Are you having one?" His eyes glittered teasingly as he leaned toward her, his hand barely touching her thigh where it rested on the cushion.

"Modern women don't have sudden flushes." There was nothing slow in the

arrival of warmth to her face, a reaction to the unusual attention Murray was paying her. "Thank you."

She felt him move slowly toward her on the cushion, felt his finger beneath her chin as he tipped her head to look at him.

"Thank you," he whispered huskily, the touch of his finger on her skin radiating its warmth to her heart.

Her free hand lifted to rest along Murray's jaw. Its slight roughness was an enticement for her other hand to abandon the smooth crystal to the table, to lift and touch his other cheek. Then with breathless intent, her mouth narrowed the distance to his with slow entrancement. Murray's hands closed around her upper arms.

Her moist lips touched his. Softly, carefully, Murray let his mouth confirm the contact. And was blinded by a surge of desire that claimed her wet surrender. He melded his lips to every crevice of hers, crushed her yielding body against him with gentle violence.

Georgette was stunned by the ravaging of Murray's kiss. A fiery strength spread through her from the jolt in the pit of her stomach, and she grasped his head to trap the pleasure he rained on her mouth. His tongue slipped between her lips, stroking the soft tissue next to her teeth, circling, sliding over her tongue. Her mouth opened to the assault as he plunged deeper and more wildly into the welcoming moistness.

His mouth broke its hold abruptly only to close again on the corner of her mouth, move on with moist reverence to her cheek, trailing her name in a wet whisper to trace the crease of her ear with his tongue. Georgette's head fell back in ecstasy as his murmurs wisped over her throat and back to her mouth, not understanding or caring what he said.

Slowly he lifted her and in one motion set her on the floor and came down on his knees in front of her. She reached to un-

button his shirt, then push it from his shoulders, until he took it the rest of the way. Bared to her sight, his bronze chest and arms glistened in the golden flames from the fireplace, flickers dancing across ripples and cords of such masculine beauty she whispered a token of her awe.

Murray moved as if commanded by the sound, his face bathed in the turmoil of desire, to slip her sweater over her head. He held her gaze as he reached around her and unfastened her bra, eased it gently away. He looked at her. His hands trembled slightly as they lifted while his head lowered to the feast.

"Make love to me, Murray," she whispered raggedly, and saw his eyes darken to new fathoms. "Please. . . ."

"I intend to." His husky whisper was as unsteady as the thumb that touched the corner of her mouth. "Oh, Lord, Georgette, I'm going to."

He finished undressing them both, then grasped her hips firmly, his thumbs pressed into the tender joints above her thighs, and his mouth opened on the soft skin just below her navel. Like a bolt of lightning, sweet sensation flashed through her, and Georgette arched and dug her fingers into his hair, crying out in mindless yearning.

"Ahhh, Georgette!" With almost savage force, he crushed her back and covered her with his massive strength. He pushed gently toward the dark, sweet secret. Then he froze and sucked in his breath with awareness of how small she was beneath him. "I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

She was beyond hurt. She dug her fingers into the tensed muscles of his hips and twisted hers, sending Murray over the brink of restraint. Their lips meshed with an intimacy that sweetened the soft descent, wove the golden threads of passion into a cloak of ethereal enchantment.

In wordless astonishment, they held

each other.

This was what she'd been running from? Georgette's mind whirled with fascination at the magic she hadn't at all suspected. She wanted to keep it, hold it close to her heart forever. Forever. . . . As soon as the thought entered her mind, she forced it away. She wouldn't risk losing this incredible feeling. She would hold on to now. But the tightening of her arms around Murray's back had a tiny edge of possessiveness that strengthened when she felt the tightening of his.

"Let me stay," he whispered.

He was some magician. Just say the magic word, she thought, and make her reason disappear. She wouldn't let him leave. She kissed her way softly from his earlobe to his mouth before she answered.

"Talk me into it."

---

Georgette sighed heavily, giving up her attempt to concentrate on plans for the MADD benefit that lay on her office desk.

Murray was out of town on business again, for all the difference that made. Yet it did make a difference and that was the problem. She uncrossed her legs. Then, in frustration, she crossed them again, thinking about Murray coming back tonight, a fact that was never far from her mind. Thinking about how little time she'd spent with him since New Year's Day.

He'd been gone a few days, back a few, gone again. But when he was in town, she was with him. Like a marshmallow. And when she wasn't with him, she was thinking about him. She should be thinking about business. He was distracting her from her work.

How could she fit a love affair into her already busy schedule? Wasn't that what her mother had done—sacrificed her own ambitions for love?

As if she didn't have enough on her mind, Georgette was thinking about kids and marriage. Murray wanted it. She

could see it in his eyes, in the new edge of tension in him. It was only a matter of time—

Time. Not much. They only had a few days left before the MADD benefit. A few days to spend with him, see the light in his blue eyes, touch him. And after the show . . . what was she going to do?

By the end of the day, she knew she had to do something. She was a decisive person, she reasoned as she left her office for the solitude of her apartment. She would sit down and calmly think it through.

But there was nothing calm about it. How could she stay calm, given the alternatives? she asked her image in her vanity mirror.

Marriage. The question was coming, she just knew it. Unless she did something to prevent it. And the only thing she could do—

Georgette shut her eyes to her reflection, forcing her mind past the thought. And didn't like the one that replaced it any better. What if she did marry Murray? What if she let her career take second place to him? How long before she took second place to something else in his life? She'd be left with nothing. Except possibly kids to raise, like her mother. A frightening consideration.

Her eyes opened. So why was it not the predominant thing in her mind? Why did that fear get pushed aside by another more dreadful feeling? The thought of losing Murray.

Oh, damn! Why had he done this to her? Made her want something she'd never wanted before? Her life had gone along peaceably until he'd forced his way into it. And she'd thought she could be calm and sensible about it! She was irritated and frustrated and—

And she loved him, said the lump in her throat. And she couldn't keep him. After the show . . .

Her eyes fell slowly to the lead-crystal

in her hand, her thumb stroking the smooth surface as her vision became blurred. A warm, salty drop wet the glass.

This was going to be harder than giving up cigarettes.

---

It was the night of the MADD benefit and Murray searched the congestion outside the dressing room with increased urgency. Cane in hand, he peered over a piece of scenery being rolled into position behind the back curtain, edging his way impatiently toward the cluster of bodies on the other side. He squinted in the dimness as he neared them. Stagehands. Tap dancers. Acrobats.

Where the hell was Georgette?

A sudden murmur of hushed voices caught Murray's attention, causing him to turn his gaze to the group on the other side of the stage. He started toward them. All he could see was a black mask and red-feathered headdress with a hint of the russet hair that was swept up beneath it. Murray stopped at the outer fringe of the group and stared at Georgette.

Lowering the tip of the cane to the floor without a word, he circled Georgette slowly as he took in the sight of black-net stockings and the skimpy red-sequined leotard, cut high at the thigh and low at the neck, that molded her curves. A low whistle trailed from his pursed lips. He lifted the cane tip to the feather plume at her shoulder.

"You expect me to concentrate on the act with you dressed like that?"

"You won't be looking at me," she whispered, not meeting his eyes.

"I will now." Murray stepped closer, for a moment forgetting all but the desire to touch her. His hand slipped to the curve at her waist. Hers covered it.

"Murray, we have a show to do."

"Then I'll save all the naughty things I could say for after the show." He'd meant his voice to be light, but the hoarseness

eroded the effect.

Georgette met his eyes quickly, briefly. She seemed to attempt a smile that failed. It left the corners of her mouth slackened with an edge of sadness as she dropped her gaze to straighten Murray's already straight tie.

"It's show time, folks," the prompter announced.

A half hour later, when the curtain descended at the end of Murray's act, he hurried off the stage with a congratulating Georgette at his heels. He ignored her praise.

"I screwed up the rings!" Murray stopped abruptly and wheeled on her, his arms lifting in exasperation. "And the rope! Did you see me fumble the rope?" With an agitated move he spun again toward the dressing rooms. "Of course you saw me. Everybody saw me!"

Georgette circled him and grabbed the edges of the cape to force him to a halt.

"They saw a good show, Murray," Georgette insisted. "You covered yourself. From the audience's perspective it was flawless."

"Flawless! Ha!"

"You heard the applause. They loved you."

"They just don't know any better—"

"Exactly. So stop berating yourself. You'd think you're the only performer ever to make a mistake! I can count on two fingers the number of perfect performances I've seen. In my entire life, Murray. This was your first show."

And his last! But that didn't make him feel a bit better. Murray shifted his weight.

"Look, when can we get out of here?"

"The last act is on." Georgette suddenly released her hold on his cape. "You can relax now."

"I don't need to," Murray mumbled, heading for the dressing room more frustrated than when he'd left it before the



show.

But he knew, when he entered Georgette's apartment behind her later, the major source of the frustration. It was walking in front of him. Why was she so distant all of a sudden?

Murray hung their coats in the hall closet. He caught himself in the act, realized how familiar he felt with her apartment. Her things. The gnawing started again. He felt. He wanted.

He feared.

Georgette left him standing in the foyer shutting the closet door. When he followed her to the living room, Murray found her poking ineffectively at the coals hidden beneath the ashes in the fireplace. She knew how to build a fire. He knew he couldn't take much more. Putting his hands at her waist, he turned her to face him.

"We don't need a fire." Murray tried to pin down her evading eyes.

"Murray . . ." Something told him he didn't want to hear what she was going to say. He kept her from saying it.

But the claim of his mouth was tentative. At first there was hesitation in her lips, as if she didn't really want to kiss him. But he felt the change—a trembling, a staying—and his mouth captured hers more surely. As his lips grew firm, hers grew soft. Sweetly, unbearably soft.

Georgette's fingers shook on the broad expanse of Murray's shoulders. She couldn't do this. She had to tell him . . . but the tenderness . . .

An overwhelming sense of loss came over her, sending her tongue to meet his as a wave of blue agony washed over her.

He surrounded her, every touch point shimmering with expectancy, every thought of its absence causing a hollow ache that crumpled her spirit. She clung to him for support as she lost her strength and her will. One last time. She would lose herself to his tenderness one last

time. Her kiss deepened in aching farewell.

Murray felt her change. Felt her gentle demand at the same time that she became pliant in his arms. Desire whipped through him, swelling, pounding, driving his mouth to possess with the force of the want in his heart. He tore his lips away to meet her gaze. The liquid heat in her eyes struck him like a blow.

"I need you, Georgette," he whispered huskily. "I need you so much."

In a staggering tumult of fear and wild joy, he carried her to the bedroom.

There he bared them to the sensual enchantment of moist secrets and strong flesh that merged and became one glittering zenith that sealed him to her forever. Possession shuddered through him as he sought her mouth to stake his claim. And drank deeply of the knowledge that she possessed him as well, their like surrender written in every sinew of their entangled flesh, in the damp bond of velvet to satin lips, in breaths that trembled with the magnitude of what they shared. It overcame him. He loosened his hold on her mouth to a feather touch.

"I love you, Georgette." His impassioned whisper brushed her lips and returned to him. "I love you."

She held him more tightly. Silently. Dizzily. He'd gone from "I need you" to "I love you." He loved her. The words spun crazily in her mind. She loved him, too, but—

"Will you marry me?"

It started at her toes, the tension that slowly turned her rigid beneath him. He raised his head to try to read her eyes in the darkness. She stared through him.

"Georgette, I want to marry you."

He waited. She drew a small breath.

"I was afraid of that."

"You—what?" Murray felt as stiff as Georgette. Stiffer. She could move. Right out from under him. His heart pounded

deafeningly as he watched her slip out of reach.

Georgette edged slowly away from Murray, the wonderful intimacy she'd felt shattered by the stunning impact of the words she'd been unprepared for. She took the sheet with her.

"Murray, I have other commitments."

Murray lay frozen for a minute, seeking some sense in what she said. But his mind swam with the awful recognition that she hadn't accepted his proposal with immediate and breathless happiness.

"What commitments?" he asked hoarsely.

"My business."

Murray frowned in bewilderment.

"What does that kind of commitment have to do with marriage?"

"The two aren't compatible," she said shakily.

"Aren't—" Murray broke off, confused by her logic. "How do you figure that? I work, you work—"

"It's not the same, Murray."

"The nature of your business is different than mine, I agree," Murray said. "But we spend all our free time together now. If we were married—"

"You'd be an even bigger distraction from my work than you are now."

Murray sat momentarily speechless. But the rapid series of emotions that had trampled through him in the last few minutes rushed to a peak. His open mouth thinned firmly to temper their release, but he couldn't suppress the blind and helpless frustration.

"Distraction! Damn! You make it sound like a major burden!" Murray stood up abruptly, hands and hips, boldly naked. "And here I've been thinking you cared for me."

"I do care for you."

"Obviously not as much as you care for your business."

"That's an unfair comparison! I've

spent years building my business—"

"I appreciate that," Murray said hotly. "But I fail to see how marrying me will interfere with—"

"Of course not! You're not the one who'll be slowed down having children! How do you think I'll be able to—"

"Children!" Murray's hands fell to his sides. "Don't you think you're getting ahead of yourself? We aren't up to marriage yet. The matter of children will work itself out when the time comes."

"Like it did for my mother?" Georgette asked. "After she gave up a promising career, only to find herself one day with two kids and no husband and no career either? Is that how it will work itself out?"

Murray felt the muscles go slack in his face.

"Is that it?" His voice carried the sudden calm of revelation. If that was all it was. . . . He walked to her slowly, an inexplicable hope rising in him. "I asked you once what you were afraid of. Is that it? That you'll suffer the same fate as your mother?"

"I don't believe in fate, Murray," Georgette said, determinedly self-controlled. "We direct our own lives by our decisions. I made the decision long ago not to invite potential disaster."

"Marrying me is an invitation to disaster?" A leaden weight sank in him when she lowered her head without answering. "I'm not like your father, Georgette."

"How do you know that?" Her eyes flew to his. The accusation he saw in them fueled the desperation that was building again. How could he convince her? The need pulled more furiously as she went on. "What if you decide after a while that you'd like to move on? What if—"

"What do you want me to do?" he interrupted harshly. "Promise I'll never—"

"Don't promise anything you can't guarantee, Murray!"

"I won't!" he fairly shouted, gripping

her shoulders as he confronted her. "There aren't any guarantees! I'm taking the same chances you are!"

"I'm not taking any chances!"

"You want to go on like we are?" he asked hoarsely, defeat skirting his tone. "Just lovers, nothing more?"

Georgette stared at him. Her mouth opened slightly. But the words lodged in her throat, closing in on one another. She just stared at him with the terrible specter of losing him clouding her mind.

"I can't." There was impassioned conviction in Murray's low rumble. "I love you and I want to marry you. I won't settle for less."

He was waiting for an answer, she knew, some kind of response, standing there in glorious nudity looking at her. With a torrent of black emotion crashing in on her, Georgette fled to the bathroom to lock herself in a dark and private misery.

The click of the door latch was like a gunshot straight to Murray's heart. He didn't move for a minute. Didn't think. He felt. He felt until there was nothing left to feel with. Numbly, he began the slow process of putting on his clothes. Walking down the hall. Crossing the living room.

He stopped at the gateleg table at the end of the couch. With unthinking dexterity, he performed the one trick he had saved, and replaced the fading mum in the vase with the red rose he pulled from his sleeve. He moved on to get his coat from the hall closet. Opened the front door to the welcome punishment of biting-cold air.

A final click shattered the oppressive silence as he closed the door behind him.

---

Murray walked down the plush-carpeted hall toward Mr. Masters's office with noticeable lack of enthusiasm for their first meeting since the MADD benefit. As he approached the carved walnut door of

Master's suite, he took a breath to straighten his shoulders. He closed the door behind him, crossed to the massive desk and sat in the wing chair to Master's right.

When the consultation over Murray's last business trip concluded, Murray closed the prospectus he'd brought with him and stood unhurriedly. He delayed his exit when Masters leaned forward in his chair, an odd alertness in his pale gray eyes as they met Murray's with forthright inquisitiveness.

"By the way, Mr. Richards."

Murray instinctively braced himself at the formal address.

"My wife prevailed upon me to attend one of her charity benefits a week or so ago," Masters went on with customary slowness. Murray's attention sharpened. "MADD, I believe it was."

Funny. He'd imagined feeling all kinds of horror if Masters ever found out about his performing. He couldn't muster any now. He looked back at Masters, without smiling, without defending, just looked and waited for the ax to fall.

"I commend you," Masters added with quiet solemnity. Murray didn't know how to read the gray eyes that pinned him with unblinking directness. "You're quite good."

The muscles in Murray's face were out of practice. They struggled between a frown and surprise. Settled on abated curiosity as he responded with an automatic "Thank you."

"I was wondering," Masters continued at a ponderous pace, "if you might consider providing some of the entertainment for the company party next month."

Murray's eyes had less trouble widening this time. They blinked once as he wondered if he'd heard right. Old Masters had just asked him to perform for the company party?

"I . . ." Murray's mind worked double

time to find an intelligible reply. "I would consider it, yes." The mind clicked on. "However, I have a commitment to an agency here called Talent Brokers. I only do bookings arranged through them." He lied smoothly, watching the subtle lift of one briskly gray brow.

"Indeed." The bristled brow lifted further. "And could this . . . Talent Brokers arrange other entertainment for the party?"

"Every kind you can imagine," Murray said without hesitation, aware that he was feeling. It was precarious, fearful. But it was feeling. "I'd be glad to coordinate their making all the arrangements for the party, if you'd like."

"Yes," Masters said slowly. "That's an excellent idea. Please do so."

---

Georgette held the phone loosely in her left hand. She stared at the frosted glass of her closed office door.

The frosted glass door opened.

Georgette sat stock-still, her pulse pounding in her temples, her eyes locked with darkly unreadable blue ones. It was the first time she had seen Murray since he'd walked out of her life two weeks ago.

A shard of terrible, wonderful feeling speared her as Murray took three slow steps to her. She could make no sense of the intense and contradictorily aloof cast of Murray's gaze.

"Hello." Murray's voice was like gravel.

It drew her gaze helplessly to the familiar masculine line of his mouth, to the crease that ran from its corner to the flare of his nostril. Hello? What did it mean? Hello, don't I know you from somewhere? Hello, I came to tell you how selfish you are? Hello, I still love you?

"I have a job for you, if you want it." There was a casualness in his voice that struck her with more force than the impersonal words themselves. A job.

"What kind of job?" Her voice sounded disembodied to her own ears.

"My company's annual party."

Georgette looked up in surprise. But the surprise was shot through with awareness of how near he was and still how far away.

"Mr. Masters just asked me to be a part of the entertainment," Murray said, still towering so rigidly above her. "I—He . . . suggested you plan the whole thing."

"The same Mr. Masters who you once told me was such a stickler about company image?" The words came out with no help from her, drawn from some reservoir of her subconscious.

"I was wrong," he said; then, lower, his mouth drawing back in a sober line, he added, "I've been wrong before."

"So you want to make arrangements for your company's party?" Georgette tried for the casual tone she used with all her customers, but it came off blunt-edged and insincere.

"Yes. If you're interested," Murray said in the impersonal tone. But there was something underlying. Something in his face, in his eyes. Georgette was afraid to look too closely.

"Of course I'm interested," she said from behind the barrier of her desk, standing between it and her swivel chair. "That's my business, after all."

"Yes," Murray said again, low, his enigmatic gaze not leaving her. "Your business."

"Well." Thank heavens she hadn't tried for an acting career. She'd get a golden turkey award for this role. "If you'll give me the date and some idea of what you want, I'll see what I can do."

"The party is traditionally held the last Friday in February, I think." Some of the casualness in Murray's voice had eroded. He sounded suddenly tired. "Except for my act, I have no ideas. I'll leave the rest up to you."

"Your act?" Georgette tried hard not to feel anything. "Then, you're going to do it?"

"Why not?" His indifference was a far cry from his initial protest against the idea. And when he spoke again, it was with studied nonchalance, though his eyes deepened with a new intensity. "Will you be able to assist me again?"

"In the act?" Her heart thudded, torn with emotion.

"Rehearsing too." He held her with those darkened eyes. "I'll need to stay in practice between now and the party."

A turbulent flurry twisted through her, stealing her breath for a minute. Then she put all feeling on hold. It was business, she told herself. This was where they'd started that long-ago first Saturday in December. How could she do anything but say yes?

"Why not?"

Georgette couldn't tell that Murray had moved a muscle, but there was something different about the way he was looking at her again. It seemed an eternity before he spoke.

"Can we start tomorrow afternoon? Same time as usual?"

"Sure." As usual. Georgette drew in a silent, trembling breath. "Tomorrow is fine."

There was a twitch at the corner of his mouth, as if he tried to smile and failed.

"Well." He inclined his head in something like a nod. "I'll see you tomorrow about five-thirty."

He turned quickly and left. Georgette's knees trembled as she lowered herself slowly to her chair, still staring at the frosted glass of her closed office door.

---

It was Friday night, and they stood on her office stage. Four days she'd put herself through this torture. Four days she'd seen the look in Murray's eyes change, grow gentler with each day as they re-

hearsed. Her need for him hadn't changed. But neither had the fact that she couldn't marry him. She was trapped in a misery of her own making.

Georgette caught herself staring blindly at the rope in her hand. Remembering her purpose, she turned abruptly to see if Murray was ready for it.

And came up hard against the brick wall of his chest. His hands closed on her shoulders to steady her balance, bracing her against him, with her hands clutching the rope between them.

"Sorry," she said on a breath, easing back from him, feeling the gradual loosening of his grip on her.

"My fault. I shouldn't have been standing so close." His jaw relaxed somewhat as he took the rope from her.

And it happened to her again, the chaos that started with a fluttering expectancy. An unreasoning anger. The urge to cry. A plummeting, nameless pain. Then the heaviness. Then awful, sluggish weight. Oh, yes. Murray's impersonal attitude had made it worse. Georgette pressed her fingers to her temple to ease the throbbing ache in her head.

Her eyes flew open when she felt Murray's warm, silent presence in front of her. She gazed up at the cautious look on his face as he draped the rope around her neck, her mind spinning back to that night exactly two weeks ago when he'd stood before her like this in regal, breathtaking nakedness.

"Something I want to try," Murray said quietly, hoarsely, his fingers grazing her shoulders.

She could feel him manipulating the thick cord just beneath the collar of her blouse, his gaze directed beyond her face to his work. She held herself very still against the lurching of her pulse, speaking to break the terrible quiet.

"You know, there's a drawback to being a magician's assistant," she said

weakly.

"What's that?" he asked huskily. "Being a guinea pig for all the new tricks?"

"No." Georgette swallowed when the warm tips of his fingers tucked inside her collar to the bare skin of her back. "Knowing how the tricks are done. It spoils the mystery."

"I'm sorry."

She felt his fingers return slowly to the rope at the back of her neck, trailing down the loose ends that hung on each side of her.

"Ready?" Murray closed his hands over the ends of the rope until his knuckles turned white. How much more of this could he take before his hands closed on her? Before his mouth crushed hers? Before the hunger overcame the fear that had lived in him since Monday, when he'd seen the old scared-rabbit look in her eyes?

Dammit, he was driving himself crazy. This trick was never done on another subject. It was done on the performer himself. Unless the performer had an irrepressible need to touch a certain subject. He'd used every excuse he could think of to be near her just so he could drive himself to madness. His hands tightened further, squeezing back the quiver of longing that threatened to expose him.

"For all appearances, I'm going to pass this rope through your neck." He should be hanging himself with it. "And I promise not to tell you how."

With a short jerk, Murray popped the rope into a taut line between them. He realized slowly that neither of them was looking at it. They were looking at each other. A horrible tightness gripped his chest as Georgette averted her eyes and stepped uneasily away from him to the table where they kept their paraphernalia.

Georgette's limbs felt like dead weight as she lifted and sorted the clutter on the tabletop without really seeing it. She was

tired. Exhausted from pouring herself into her work, from warding off feelings . . . Her head felt thick and her eyes burned. Obviously she was getting sick, on top of everything else.

Like the walls of Jericho, her steely determination crumbled in a sigh. She turned awkwardly to face Murray.

"I forgot to tell you"—since about ten seconds ago—"I won't be able to rehearse with you tomorrow." She couldn't think of a ready reason, except that she couldn't take anymore, so she left it at that. "We can pick up again Monday."

"Okay," he said, with no trace of emotion, as if it were of no consequence to him.

Her aching head pounded more furiously, fogging her vision as she glanced briefly at his face and then past him. A sudden tickling in her nose brought her hand to cover it in time to stifle a sneeze.

"Gesundheit," Murray said tonelessly.

"Thank you." Georgette looked at him through watery eyes. Then she muttered her intention to visit the ladies' room to get a tissue and left quickly without another word.

When she returned to her office, Murray was gone.

---

Georgette's cold was as its peak on Monday morning, and she decided to stay home in bed. The sound of the doorbell brought a frown to her face. She snuggled more deeply into the blankets. The bell rang again. She pulled the sheet over her head. On the third impatient ring, she groaned, cursed, and fumbled her way out of the mountain of covers on her bed, grabbing a handful of tissues as she stood.

When she opened the door, she found herself staring up at Murray. She didn't even get a chance to close her opened mouth before he stepped inside, physically forcing her back with a hand on her arm. His other closed the door to the cold



outside.

"Georgette!" Murray's gaze dropped accusingly to her bare feet on the tiled entry floor. She sneezed. Before her eyes had refocused, her feet left the floor as Murray swept her into his arms and started toward the bedroom with her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked through her stuffy nose, not wanting to question how good his arms felt cradling her.

"What do you think?" His blue eyes flashed at her and then ahead, to watch where he was going. "I knew you were getting sick, so I came to feed you chicken soup."

"I hate chicken soup."

"Then I'll feed you whatever you want," he said, lowering her to her bed. "I'm not hungry."

"Then I won't make you eat anything until you are." Tucking her feet in, Murray pulled the covers to her chin before taking off his coat. Without hesitation his hand lifted to press his palm to her feverish forehead.

"Why are you being so agreeable?" she asked suspiciously, lacking the strength to deal with the question of why he was there at all.

"Sick people should always be humored. How long has it been since you took aspirin?"

Long enough ago that it was time to take more, it was decided. Murray administered them, along with the orange juice he made from the frozen concentrate he found in her kitchen.

As she relaxed deeper into her pillow, Murray braced himself above her with a hand on each side.

"Now tell me what I can do to help out at the office."

"Help out . . ." Georgette's eyes sought his in bewilderment. "Murray, you have your own work to worry about."

"It's no more important than yours,"

Murray said quietly. "You've worked hard to get the agency where it is. I don't want you to experience any setback if there's anything I can do to prevent it."

She studied the concerned lines in Murray's face. He meant it. Unless her fever was causing delusions.

"But, Murray, I can't ask you—"

"You didn't ask. I offered. Any friend would do the same." There was a dark flicker in Murray's eyes as they held hers. He didn't move a muscle as he added huskily, "And we're a little more than friends, aren't we?"

Then his mouth touched hers in a light kiss that didn't interfere with her difficult breathing. Her shock triggered a protest of a different kind to bury the fluttering and churning inside her.

"Murray, you'll catch my cold!"

He leaned over her, taking her face in both hands. His eyes held the tenderness that had been her undoing. It was about to undo her again. Not knowing whether to put her arms around him or pull away, she held very still.

"I want to share everything with you," Murray said quietly. And gently kissed her again.

"Murray . . ." What was she going to do? The awful uncertainty was worse than a thousand colds. "I . . . I appreciate it, but . . . there's no need for you to keep this up."

"I want to, Georgette."

"Why, Murray? Why are you here? Nothing has changed."

"Maybe it has." Murray looked down at her for a long, hesitant moment. "Ah, damn, Georgette, I love you. I just . . . love you. I still want you to be my wife," he said hoarsely. "But if I can't have you for my wife, I'll take you any way I can get you. That's what's changed. I want you on any terms you'll have me."

Georgette choked back the sob in her throat, and with it any remote chance of an

answer to what Murray had said. She couldn't stop the tears that brimmed in her eyes.

"Please don't cry." His hands came out of his pockets to clench and unclench and clench again: "It makes me want to hold you. And you don't want me to hold you, so . . ."

Who said she didn't want him to hold her? But she couldn't say she did.

"You don't have to make a decision right now." Emotion thickened Murray's voice as he watched, waited as if he'd grasp her at any moment. "Please . . . please don't cry."

With a supreme effort that hurt her throat, she stifled her tears. But they were locked just beneath the surface of the control that masked her face.

"Do you keep an extra apartment key here somewhere so I can come back later?" he asked, still hoarse.

"Under the paper clown on the cork board," she whispered shakily. And her eyes filled again.

The corner of Murray's mouth flinched in reaction, his hands hesitating as though they would reach for her. She blinked quickly to stop him and held herself rigid until finally, slowly, he turned and left the room.

Then she cried.

---

It had started with the rose. The red one Murray had found behind her left ear the second day he came to nurse her. The single flower in the vase on her nightstand had become a small bouquet, growing by one a day, even after she'd returned to work on Friday. Each addition had chipped away at Georgette's reserve.

Now, fully recovered, she stood in her kitchen. They had just had dinner. Georgette set two snifters on her kitchen counter, preoccupied with the memory of his behavior. Murray had said he'd take her on any terms she chose. He'd settle for

being just lovers again. She'd given no verbal answer to that proposition. And they hadn't made love since the night he'd asked her to marry him. What would her answer be if—

Two masculine hands came from behind her to brace on the edge of the counter, the warm male body pressing lightly against her back. As she turned her head to look up at Murray, his lips lowered to the soft spot beneath her ear, sending goosebumps skittering over her skin.

"Need some help?" he murmured against her neck.

"Uh . . ." Oh, hell, she was a goner. Georgette lifted a glass beneath his nose. "Not that kind."

Murray took the glass, but stayed where he was. His free hand slid across her middle and pulled her gently back against him, his cheek touching her temple.

With a small, courageous breath she turned her head slowly against Murray's jaw until her lips were in line with his. Her gaze lingered in fascination on his generous mouth before his lips parted to descend slowly toward hers.

Their touch was soft and persuasive, pulling a dizzy sigh from her as she rested limply against him. Then he lifted his head. And she saw in his eyes the embers of feeling that needed no confession. He loved her. He really loved her. How lucky could she get?

"Are we going to stand in here all night or do you want to see a new trick I've been practicing?" Murray asked with an inviting lift of one brow.

"By all means, let magic prevail."

Turning in his arm, Georgette followed Murray's lead back to the living room. She sat next to him on the couch, setting her glass beside his on the marble coffee table.

She watched him drape a handkerchief over one fisted hand before he glanced at her. "Thanks for running interference for

me at the office while I was out of commission. You really made a difference," she murmured.

"I was glad to do it." Murray pulled the corners of the cloth so that it rested squarely over his fist.

Murray held her gaze for a minute. Then he said quietly, his voice husky, "Give me your ring."

Handing the ring to him, she paid little attention as he placed it in the center of the cloth over his fist.

"Really, Murray," she insisted. "Thank you."

He didn't look at her. When he spoke, it was in a conversational tone.

"I think people who love each other usually find sharing work loads a natural extension of their relationship." Murray poked the ring with a finger, pushing it and the cloth through the circle of his fist.

"But I've never shared yours," she said quietly.

"Oh, but you have," he said. "Every time you've asked what kind of day I've had. Every time your eyes have told me you care whether it was good or bad. Every time you've tried to make it better." His voice dropped to a caress. "Every time you have made it better."

Murray looked back at the handkerchief, manipulating the pocket he'd poked by pulling the center a little lower through his slightly open hand.

"It's a two-way street, you know. I think that's the way marriage should be," he said casually. "Whether it's business or children, I think the responsibilities should be shared."

He did? Georgette felt a slowly growing suspicion at his bringing up the subject. And mulled over her lack of alarm this time.

"Kind of a partnership," Murray added, straightening the corners of the cloth. Then he turned the dusky intimacy of his gaze to her. It was steady and tender, like

his voice when he asked, "Would you consider entering that kind of partnership with me?"

A ghost of a smile flirted with the corners of Georgette's mouth. Before it developed fully, Murray pulled the pocket of the handkerchief the rest of the way through his hand without looking at it, holding the cloth up by two corners to reveal that her ring had disappeared.

Then, with a flourish, he placed the cloth over his hand again and poked the center of it with his finger. But instead of pulling the pocket from the bottom, he pulled one corner until the center reappeared at the top of his covered hand. Georgette saw with fascination the glitter of her ring in the slight depression.

Glitter? Her pearl ring? Georgette leaned closer. And opened her mouth soundlessly at the sight of a diamond solitaire. A diamond solitaire that looked suspiciously like an engagement ring.

"Will you marry me, Georgette?"

Her heart stopped for a beat, then slipped into intoxicated rhythm.

"Murray, there's something I haven't told you."

"What?" The look in his eyes said whatever it was, he could handle it. She figured he could.

"I love you."

"And I love you," Murray whispered against her mouth. Then his devastating lips claimed hers to tenderly reinforce his words.

Until he broke away and covered his nose just in time for a sneeze.

Georgette plucked the diamond ring from where he still held it in the handkerchief. She traded it for a tissue and a cold tablet from her purse on the low marble table.

"How do you feel about chicken soup?" she asked as she led Murray to her bedroom, prepared to feed him cheese from the moon if that was what he wanted. ♥



# *Aspen Holiday*

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*May and June may be twins, but it's May who's the star—until  
handsome Dan Files shows up in Aspen.*

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**KARLYN THAYER**

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“Remember to get the hem fixed on the gold dress,” May said on her way out the door. “Oh, and don’t forget to call Mom and wish her happy birthday.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” June said. “I’ll take care of everything. Go ahead and get your hair fixed.”

May was gone in a flurry—the only way May ever went anywhere. June sighed and glanced around the cluttered condominium, their home as long as they stayed in Aspen, Colorado, for the celeb-

rity ski tournament. It wasn’t much of a tournament. May had to put in one short appearance, then she would be finished, but it was all for a good cause. The money would go to medical research.

June knew she should make an attempt to clean up the room and arrange to have the gold dress repaired while May was gone, but she was suddenly too tired to deal with gold sequins and clutter.

Instead she put water on the stove for a cup of tea and sat down to rest. Resting

times were few since she'd been hired as May James' personal assistant, press secretary, and road manager. Ordinarily, she didn't mind being the twin of a world-famous model with a budding singing career. Ordinarily June thrived on the constant work and activity, but lately it had been wearing on her. She had all the work while May got the bright lights, the applause and the accolades. Lately she'd been thinking about quitting and finding less-demanding work.

The tea kettle whistled and June got up to pour hot water into a china cup, adding a bag of tea and pausing to inhale the aroma. It wasn't as if May couldn't survive without her, but she knew what her sister's reaction would be if the subject of quitting were mentioned.

She turned her head at the sound of a sharp knock on the condo door. Reluctantly she moved to open the door, trusting the condominium security guards had screened out unwanted visitors.

The man standing at the door surprised her, not because he was tall, not because he was remarkably handsome with a straight, narrow nose and dark eyes under thick dark brows, but because he was holding out a bouquet of aspen branches sprouting leaves of bright fluorescent gold. June blinked and stared.

"Miss James?"

"Yes?"

"These branches are for you."

"They're lovely! I thought all the leaves had fallen a couple of months ago."

"That's why I brought them, as a gift."

She knew he intended them for May, but she accepted them anyway. It wouldn't hurt for him to think she was May, at least for a little while. "Thanks very much," she said. "Is there something I can do for you?" She was torn between inviting him in and leaving him standing in the hall.

"I guess I should introduce myself," he

said, looking at her with intense interest. "I'm Dan Files, the editor of the *Aspen Edge*. It's a monthly newspaper geared to the ski crowd."

June frowned. She had sent out publicity packets, along with invitations to a press conference, to all the publications listed by the Aspen Chamber of Commerce. She didn't remember any publication called the *Edge*. "Do you have any identification?" she asked. He produced a business card with a gold leaf embossed in the corner.

"I would have called before I came over," he said, "but I make a better impression in person." He offered an engaging grin, with an intriguing set of dimples. He was irresistible, and he knew it.

June smiled. "Is the *Edge* a new publication?" she asked. The aroma of his aftershave drifted her way. "The Chamber of Commerce doesn't have you listed."

"It must have been an oversight," he said, shrugging. "I've been publishing for three years now." He stood patiently, waiting for her approval.

"Okay," June said, "May is giving an official press conference tonight. I can get you in and you can interview her with the rest of the media. But I can't really grant you an exclusive interview."

He was obviously confused. "You're not—May James?"

"No, I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm June. We're fraternal twins. We look a lot alike, but actually she's two inches taller than I am." She didn't add that May was also inches bigger in the bust, and that May's hair was two shades lighter blond.

"I can't say I'm disappointed." He leaned forward and his dimples became more apparent. His deep voice was surprisingly intimate.

June decided suddenly that she trusted him. "You might as well come in and have a cup of tea with me." She opened the

door, then reached over and picked up a stack of photographs and papers lying on the table near the door. "This is May's press kit. You can use it when you write about her."

She crossed to the kitchen and heard him following her. Locating a vase, she arranged the aspen leaves and placed the display on the table.

Dan sat down at the table. "All the other newspapers got the same press kit, I presume."

"That's right."

"And everyone else will be at the press conference tonight."

June prepared another cup of tea. "I guess so."

"I was hoping for something more personal."

She smiled at him. "Aren't we all."

He laughed. "You're protective of her, aren't you."

"It's my job." She placed a cup before him, then sat down herself. In spite of his unauthorized approach, she felt she might give him what he had come for—an exclusive interview. If he kept using those dimples, she thought, she might give him just about anything.

"Are you ever jealous of her?" Dan asked.

"No, I never wanted to take the world by storm. I've always been comfortable being May's sister. But it could so easily have been the other way. I could have been born first. I might have gotten May's ambition." She sipped her tea. "I'm glad I didn't."

"Why do you say that? Isn't she happy?"

"Oh, she's happy. She thrives on this life. Personally I'd rather sit by a fire and drink tea. I guess I'm lazy."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"You don't know me."

"I'd like to."

Sure he'd like to, she thought, suddenly

losing the trust she'd felt for him. She looked away. He'd probably like to get to know her to get to May. It had happened before. And as soon as he met May . . .

Her mind swept back to another time, years earlier. The boy's name had been Jed. She had met him in a roller skating rink, and although she was only seventeen years old at the time, she had thought it was true love. Jed had thought so, too, and he had given her an engagement ring. They agreed they would not tell their parents or anyone else about their engagement, but would marry the following year when she was eighteen and he was nineteen.

It was a story-book romance, full of tears and laughter and longing. Jed was perfect in every way, or so June thought at the time. Then, by chance, she and Jed had run into May in an ice cream store and Jed had been immediately captivated by May's charms. In May, he saw a slightly improved version of the girl he already loved, and he began to pursue her. Unaware of June's feelings, May began to spend time with Jed, and their engagement to marry was soon broken off.

June didn't actually hold a grudge. She didn't blame Jed or May or even herself. But on the other hand, she didn't trust May with any man she was personally interested in. She had worked hard over the years to keep her sister away from her dates, preferring to meet them somewhere rather than have them pick her up and meet May in the process.

Of course it wasn't fair to Dan to assume he was another Jed. Dan had the maturity Jed had lacked, and he seemed very down-to-earth. June found she desperately *wanted* to trust him. "Can you keep a secret?" she suddenly asked.

He frowned. "You ask a newspaperman that question?"

She laughed. "I'll have to trust you anyway. This information is not to go beyond

this room."

"My lips are sealed."

"All right. In the ski tournament tomorrow morning, people will think they're seeing May, but actually they'll be seeing me disguised as May. She doesn't like to ski, so I'm going to take her place."

"You think no one will notice the difference?"

"People see what they expect to see. We figure, with a knit cap and ski goggles, we'll get away with it." She looked directly at him. "Unless, of course, somebody spills the beans."

"I won't tell on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you let me spend the day with you tomorrow."

"Just like that? I don't even know you."

"That's what I'd like to remedy."

June smiled. She was pleased, and yet she was uncertain. "I don't know. I have—obligations."

"As much time as you can give me, then."

"Well, since you put it that way, all right." She glanced at her watch. May would be back soon and she did not particularly want her sister to see Dan. "Right now, I've got a thousand details to take care of. Can I meet you tomorrow morning, at the ski area?"

"I'll pick you up."

"No, thanks." She tried to laugh off her fear of seeing him attracted to May. "It may take me quite awhile to make myself look like May. I'll have to put on a lot more makeup, not to mention the designer ski outfit, so I don't know when I'll be ready. Tell me where I can meet you."

"How about just outside the main lodge?"

"That's fine. I'll see you tomorrow morning, sometime between eight and nine." She hurried him out the door, hoping he wouldn't run into May on the way out. She told herself she was being fool-

ish. Yet she clung to the hope she might keep him for herself—at least for a little while.

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The next morning, June quickly dressed in the ski outfit she and May had picked out—pastel pink knit pants, a white turtleneck sweater, and a darker pink ski jacket with white fur around the collar. June thought the outfit gaudy and extreme, but May was a star and had to dress like one.

May helped with her makeup. When she was ready, she was May's duplicate. She gathered up the pink and white knit cap and white gloves. May gave her a final inspection.

"Don't I look pretty!" May said, delighted with her sister. "Do you have the goggles?"

"Oh, they're here somewhere."

"You look better in those stretch pants than I would. I'm glad we decided to do this, but remember, you're supposed to be me so don't say anything stupid or do anything to embarrass me."

"I don't plan to, May," June said sarcastically.

"Oh I know, I'm just nervous. I've never tried to fool the public like this before."

"You want the outfit? You want to ski yourself?"

"No, of course not. You know I'd fall on my behind. Forgive me, I know you'll do a good job. I'll just stay here in this nice warm condo and paint my nails."

Watching out the window, June saw her cab arrive. She quickly kissed her sister, then slipped out and took on the job of being May James, international celebrity.

The cab driver's eyes widened when she got in. "Are you . . . ?" he asked.

"May James. I'm headed for the ski area."

"Sure, you're going to ski in the tournament. I read about it in the paper. Do you think I could get your autograph?"



"Sure, no problem." She signed an envelope for him. It was fun being somebody for a little while, but she had no desire to be May full time.

The driver dropped her off at the ski area and wished her good luck. She needed it. The moment she stepped from the cab, she was swamped with reporters and photographers. She looked around for Dan and saw him back, away from the crowd, looking amused.

The reporters were throwing questions at her faster than she could possibly answer. Unlike May, she was not accustomed to dealing with them. Seeking Dan's gaze again, she mouthed the word, "help."

He came to her rescue. She felt his strong hand on her arm and she looked at him gratefully. He held up his hand and miraculously silenced the group of reporters.

"Miss James gave her press conference last night. If you missed it, press kits are available. Right now, she has to get over to the slopes for the tournament. So if you'll excuse us . . ." He steered her away from them.

"Just one question," the most persistent reporter said, following close on their heels. "I heard that you aren't much of a skier, Miss James. Aren't you taking a chance on getting hurt?"

"I don't know where you heard that," Dan answered for her. "Miss James skis like an angel. Watch and see."

In a few moments, they were away from the crowd. "Thank you," June said. "I was lost. I didn't know what to do."

"The best person to help you deal with reporters is another reporter," he said, smiling.

"I appreciate it." She paused and looked up at him. "I don't know about all this. I'm beginning to get nervous."

"You don't want to ski?"

"It's not that. It's fooling people I don't

like. I'm not comfortable with it."

Dan smiled. "In the list of the world's sins, Miss James, this is a very small one."

He grinned and led her to a chairlift where a guard checked to see that only celebrities got on. "I'm May James," she said, "and he's with me." The guard checked his list and let them on. In a few moments they were high above the ground and rapidly gaining altitude.

"How beautiful it is!" June said. "The air's so clear and cold."

"After you do your official celebrity duty, I'd like to show you some other ski trails I know about—trails not on the ski maps."

"It sounds like fun. I don't really know how much time I'm supposed to put in here."

"We're about to find out. Get ready to jump off." At the top of the slope, they were met by television cameras and the host of the tournament, Roger Trout, a former Olympic skier turned sports announcer.

June smiled broadly and tried to look happy. She had agreed to *ski* for May, not to *talk* for her. "May James," Roger Trout said, "it's great to have you here with us in Aspen."

"I'm really happy to be her, Roger," she heard herself say. She was aware that Dan was standing behind her, and he gave her courage. "I'm always glad to help out in a tournament like this where the money goes to a good cause."

Trout flashed a professional smile. "Now let me tell you what we've got cooked up for you. Since you're a singer, we've decided to put you up against another singer, Bo McNally. Bo, come on over here and meet May James."

June kept smiling. Bo McNally was the leader of a punk rock group. She didn't care for his music, but then he probably didn't care for May's music, either. She

shook hands with him and in a minute, she found herself lined up to race against him to the bottom on the hill, where a second television crew would pick her up and interview her again.

She kept smiling, dug in, and beat the punk rocker by a good ten yards.

A few more smiles, a few more comments to the television people and another testimonial to the benefit of the tournament, and suddenly she was free. Dan came up and kissed her on the cheek. "You were great! Like an angel."

She was glad it was over. Being May was a heavy burden. She was happy to go back to being June. "I've done my bit," she said to Dan. "Can we go now?"

"We can go wherever you want. I know a great ski trail that ends at a lodge where there's a log fire and hot spiced cider."

The day was perfect, the snow was perfect, and Dan was perfect. They skied the rest of the morning and then stopped for hot cider as Dan had promised. June thought she should have been tired, but she wasn't. The cold air was invigorating. "I can't remember when I've had so much fun," June said. "I guess I really *needed* to get out, to get away from May for awhile."

"She shouldn't have such a hold on you," Dan said.

"No, it's all right. It's my *job*." She stopped and smiled. "But not today. I've declared this my day off."

"You mean I can keep you for awhile?"

June offered her most dazzling smile. "For a little while, anyway. Let's do something wild."

"How about a ride in a topless Jeep? Would that be wild enough for you?"

"There's only one way to find out." Dan led her to his Jeep. She was barely strapped in when he put the Jeep in gear and roared toward the mountains. He concentrated on driving, allowing June to concentrate on his profile. The more she

saw of Dan Files, the more she liked him.

A few miles out of town, he slowed and steered the Jeep onto a dirt trail that led sharply upward. "Hang on," Dan advised, and June gripped the side of the Jeep as it climbed up slopes she thought impossible to climb. They continued upward, toward the clouds, until they reached a plateau, far above the highway they had left.

Dan turned off the ignition and stepped out of the Jeep, then walked a few feet away to gaze out at the mountains. June followed, coming up behind him quietly, halting an impulse to put her arms around him. She did not entirely understand it, but she sensed his bringing her here was a test of some kind.

The view before them was a vast panorama of white-topped mountains in countless shades of blue and green and gray, smoky dark in shadow, brilliant in sunlight. June stared, wide-eyed.

"What do you think?" Dan asked, finally turning to her.

It was easy to be honest. "I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He looked back at the scene for a moment. "Some people say the canyons and heights of Manhattan are as beautiful as this."

June shrugged. "I've lived in Manhattan much of my life, and it does have a beauty of its own. But I don't think it can compete with this."

"I hoped you would feel that way," Dan said, smiling at her. "I came to the same conclusion myself several years ago."

"You were in Manhattan?"

He nodded. "I was an editor at the *New York Times*, and a pretty good one if I do say so myself. I must have been good, because I was well paid."

"So how did you get here?"

"I came out here for a ski vacation one winter and I never went back."

June moved a little closer to him. "I imagine it would take a lot of courage to

turn your back on your job and friends and everything, for a completely different way of life."

"It didn't take courage," he said, laughing. "It took a willingness to live on next to nothing as I was getting the *Edge* started. Even now, it's a long way from making me rich."

"But you wouldn't go back."

"No. The life I have here is more valuable to me than the money I could earn back east. I have to accept the fact that the *Edge* will never be more than a small-town newspaper."

June smiled. "Maybe what the *Edge* needs to give it a boost is an exclusive interview with the famous May James."

He raised a brow. "You'd arrange that for me?"

"No, but I'd answer your questions myself—with precisely the same answers that May would give. It would be exactly like an interview with her, and your readers would never know the difference."

"I could use some photos. Different from the ones in the press kit."

"I can dig up a couple, don't worry."

"You are a life-saver." He hugged her and turned her toward the Jeep. "Let me drive you to my office."

June turned up the fur collar on her jacket and held on tightly for the trip down the mountain. Dan's office turned out to be an unimpressive hole in the wall behind a bakery. "I'm in the process of building my own house," he explained. "When it's finished, it will have an office where most of this work can be done. For now, I pay an astonishing amount of rent for this place without heat."

"But you get to smell doughnuts all the time."

"That's a nice feature, but most of the time I'd rather have the heat. Sit here." He pulled out a chair for her and sat down behind his desk. He took a moment to go over May's fact sheet and publicity mate-

rial that June had given him the day before. All the basic information about May's life was there in black and white.

"All right," Dan finally said. "What can I ask you about May that nobody else will ask? Remember, this is exclusive. I want material nobody else has."

June was finding it hard to concentrate on May with the aroma of doughnuts in the air. She twisted in her chair. "Do you think they have blueberry doughnuts? At the bakery?"

"Probably. They've got all kinds."

"I'd like to try them. Put that in your story: May's sister likes blueberry doughnuts."

"Ah, but what kind of doughnuts does May like? That's what the readers want to know."

June settled in to give him the story he wanted. "Oh, I don't know. She's awfully dull sometimes. She eats vanilla ice cream, if that tells you anything." She realized she was slightly demeaning her sister. She didn't normally do that sort of thing. She normally praised May without limit. She supposed this new attitude had to do with keeping Dan's attention focused on herself.

"You don't really want to talk about May, do you?" Dan said, picking up her negative attitude.

June made an effort to straighten herself out. "Hey, I said I'd give you an exclusive story and I will. Here's a bit you can use: May is a little bit insecure about her singing ability. Every time before she performs for an audience, she spends about an hour in meditation, listening to sitar music. She says it calms her."

"That is interesting," Dan said, writing it down. "She doesn't seem the meditative type."

"I know what you mean. Miss Bubbly, right? She was first runner up for the Miss New York title. That's typical of her image."

Dan studied her through narrowed eyes. "You're not envious, are you? You seem to be a little bit harsh in your assessment."

"I'm sorry. I'm not normally this way. I guess you bring out the worst in me. I'm not really envious of May at all."

"You don't want me to print a whole story of negative comments, do you?"

"No, of course not."

Dan leaned toward her, amused and curious. "If you don't want a negative story, what *do* you want?"

"I want some blueberry doughnuts."

He laughed and sat back. "It looks like I'm out of luck for a story."

June tried to concentrate. "If I give you a story you can use, can we get doughnuts afterwards? Please?"

"It seems a small enough price to pay."

"All right, listen. Write this down." She paused for a moment, biting her lip. "May is a very romantic person, by which I mean she likes love songs and romantic movies and books. 'Casablanca' is her favorite movie. But it seems as if dedicating herself to creating romance for others is more important to her than finding her own love. Obviously she has met some of the world's most eligible bachelors, but she's never been serious about any of them. If you promise not to reveal the source, I'll give you a real *juicy* bit."

"Give."

"All right. May once spent a weekend on Prince Andre's yacht."

Dan whistled. "*The Prince Andre*, heir to the throne?"

"That's the one. According to May, he suggested a more permanent arrangement, but she turned him down. You see what I mean? Who would turn down Prince Andre?"

"That's juicy, all right. If she'd played her cards right, I suppose she could have been a princess. As it happens, I met Prince Andre when he was here for *last*

year's celebrity ski tournament. Not only does he have half the money in the world, but he's also handsome and charming."

"But May didn't go for it. And that's the whole point: she's postponed love for herself, maybe forever, in favor of her career."

"And what about you?"

June looked up. "What about me? This is May's interview."

"Yes, but I'm more interested in you."

His dark eyes demanded her attention.

"Have you ever been in love?"

The intimacy of the question surprised her. She shifted in the straight chair. "I thought I was, once, but I was much younger."

"And what happened?"

June stood up suddenly. "I don't want to talk about it. I want doughnuts, and I want them *now*."

Dan smiled and stood up, reaching for his jacket. "All right, doughnut lady, let's go." Taking her arm, he led her outside and around the end of the building. The bakery was warm and smelled of yeast and cinnamon. Behind the counter, an apple-cheeked woman greeted them.

"How are you, Dan?"

"I'm fine. I want you to meet a friend of mine, June James. She's after blueberry doughnuts."

The woman leaned over behind the display case. "I've got three left."

"We'll take all of them," Dan said.

"Hey, thanks, big spender."

"Of course. Nothing but the best for you."

"Dollar fifty," the woman said, putting the doughnuts in a white paper sack. June took the sack and opened it immediately, consuming one doughnut on the way out the door.

"Doesn't May allow you to eat?" Dan asked.

"No, she has to watch her weight all the time, so I do too, out of courtesy. That's

why I have to eat all three of these before I get back. Otherwise it would be a temptation for her."

"What a noble, self-sacrificing sister you are."

"That's right." She took a second doughnut out and bit into it. "You want one?"

"I wouldn't dare." They walked around to where the Jeep was parked. The sun was going down and it was almost dark behind the building now. "June," Dan began.

"What?"

"I'd like to ask a very special favor of you."

June backed up a step. "Let me guess. You still want an exclusive interview with May, right?" She tried to keep the acid out of her tone, but she didn't succeed.

"Not right," Dan quickly. "I've got enough material on May with our talk and the press pack to write my story now. What I want to ask now is for an exclusive evening with *you*. I want to buy you dinner; more doughnuts, whatever you want."

She peered at him through huge blue eyes. "Really?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"I guess because I'm accustomed to being second choice. If I have dinner with you, then I have a special favor to ask of you, too."

"Ask away."

"There's a special awards ceremony tonight for the participants of the ski tournament. I'd like to ask you not to go." The longer she could keep him away from May, the better.

"No problem," Dan said. "I wasn't planning to go anyway. But can I ask why you don't want me to go?"

"No, you can not. It's a personal reason. Now where should I meet you for dinner?"

"I can pick you up. I'll even put the top

on the Jeep."

"No. I mean yes, put the top on the Jeep, but don't pick me up. I'll meet you, wherever you say."

Dan sighed. "You're a mysterious lady. Meet me at the Riverside Mill at seven-thirty."

"I'll be there."

"Good. Hop in and I'll drive you home." She hopped in and allowed him to drive her part way.

"Whoa," she said when they were within a block of the condominium. "I'll walk the rest of the way."

"I hope you don't have a husband you're trying to hide me from."

"No husband. I'll see you tonight."

June hopped out with a wave and hurried the last block to the condo. She wanted to wash her hair, if May had left her any hot water.

May appeared cross when June unlocked the door. "Where have you *been* all day? I've been going crazy here."

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Number one, you never called me after the ski tournament so I didn't know if you were hurt, and I didn't know if it was safe for me to show my face in public, and number two, I don't have my green shoes. You're going to have to dye the white ones while I'm getting ready for the awards ceremony."

"May, there's nothing wrong with the white shoes. Nobody's going to be looking at your feet."

May glared. "I'll know I'm wearing the wrong color shoes. You know I *always* wear matching shoes. Always."

"Well, you could make an exception, couldn't you? It so happens I have a date tonight and I don't have time to dye your damn shoes."

The sisters stared angrily at each other across the room. "Pardon me," May finally said, softly. "I thought it was your *job* to take care of my shoes. I certainly

wouldn't want your job to get in the way of your social life, even though you're paid far more than most people in similar positions."

June simply stared, too angry and upset to reply. At last she crossed the room and picked up May's white shoes, then quickly turned and walked out with them. She knew a shoe store in the area that would do the job for her. It was all right, she told herself. She would have time to get ready for her date, even if she didn't have time to wash her hair.

Her temper cooled as she walked. May, in fact, was absolutely right. June was paid well for her work, and it was her job to take care of the shoes. She couldn't remember what had happened to the green shoes they'd started the trip with, but she knew they had been her responsibility.

It was odd, she thought as she waited for the shoes to be finished. She and May seldom quarreled about anything, let alone something as silly as shoes. It was the threat of losing Dan that had caused the trouble, she realized. Losing Dan? She didn't even have Dan to lose. The quarrel had been an over-reaction on her part.

She adjusted her attitude so that she wore a smile when she finally got back with the shoes, dyed a perfect green to match May's dress.

"I'm sorry about the shoe problem," she said immediately.

"I'm sorry I yelled. You know how nervous I get before I appear in public. I have to have everything just so, even if it's my underwear."

"I know. I won't let it happen again."

"Good. Now, what did I hear you say about a date?"

"I'm meeting a man for dinner."

"Is that all you're going to tell me?"

"What else do you want to know?"

"What's his name, what he looks like, what he does for a living, you know."

June bit her lip. She didn't want to

share Dan with her sister in any way—not even his description. "His name is Igor. He's a bit hunched over and he's the official town bell-ringer."

"Igor?"

"That's right."

"All right, if you want to be secretive, go ahead."

"I do. You want me to call for a cab for you? Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, but I wish you were going with me."

"You'll be fine, May. You know you will."

With May finally gone, June looked at her watch. She wouldn't have time to wash her hair, but she could take a quick bath and still meet Dan on time. Regaining some of her earlier anger, she quickly undressed and drew some bath water. May had, of course, used almost all of the hot water.

After a quick bath June pulled on a clean pair of white slacks, then topped them with a white lace blouse and a pink velvet vest. She did a quick job on her makeup and fluffed her hair as best she could, then set out to walk to the Riverside Mill Restaurant.

She was red-cheeked and breathless when she arrived. Dan stood outside waiting for her, pacing impatiently.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "I got tied up on business."

"Sister business?"

"Naturally."

"But she finally let you go."

"It was more like I finally got rid of her. Shall we go in?"

The restaurant, like almost all of Aspen's restaurants, was elegant almost to a fault. A waiter in a stiffly-starched uniform showed them to a table where silver and crystal gleamed in candlelight on spotless, expensive linen. Near their table, a waterfall splashed into a small pool full of goldfish. After their day in the out-

doors, June felt restless and closed in.

"I don't know," she said. "This is almost *too* fancy."

Dan frowned. "Frankly, I wanted to impress you."

"It's very nice, but sometimes a hot dog and a Coke is just as good. It's the company that makes the difference."

"A hot dog and a Coke would certainly be kinder to my budget. I hadn't really thought about it, but I suppose you've been wine and dined in fancy places all over the world."

"May would like it here. May would love it."

Dan's dark eyes looked troubled. "Why do you mention May now?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"There's something not right between the two of you. On the one hand, you're terribly dedicated to your sister. On the other hand, you seem to resent her."

"I don't resent her," June said quickly, but deep inside she realized Dan was right. "I spend a lot of time with her. I can't simply put her out of my mind." She smiled. "Let's go get a hot dog and a Coke."

Dan laughed. "We can't very well just get up and leave."

"We can't? It's a free country."

"Everyone would stare at us."

"I've been stared at before. Let's chance it." As they stood, the waiter came up, looking worried. "We've changed our mind about dining here this evening," June said sweetly.

They walked from the restaurant to a nearby diner and ordered Cokes and hot dogs. June spread mustard thick on her hot dog. "I suppose May's getting her award about now," she said casually.

Dan set down his hot dog. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Thinking about May. Think about *yourself*."

June licked mustard off her finger. "I didn't realize I was thinking about her so much. It's a habit, I guess."

"It's a habit you should break."

A smile lit June's face. "We've been part of each other for so long, May and I. We're much closer than regular sisters."

"I understand that. But June James is every bit as important as May James."

"Thanks," June said. "I think I needed to hear that."

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June heard such things often from Dan during the following week. Each evening, he made certain to plan an outing that pleased only her. Touched by his caring and concern, she blossomed like a spring flower and began to believe she really *was* as important as her famous sister.

She ignored May's questions and demands. She did her job but took out plenty of time for herself. The new feeling of independence was wonderful.

The day before May and June were scheduled to leave Aspen, Dan took her to another elegant restaurant and announced afterwards that he wanted to show her his house.

June tried hard to put any worries out of her mind as Dan drove them out of town, then up a paved road. The road wound into the hills and finally stopped at a clearing in the forest. Dan shut off the engine. Moonlight lit Dan's house, which was nestled into the surrounding landscape.

"Frank Lloyd Wright would approve," June said.

"Come on, get out and take a look." He went around and opened the Jeep door for her, then helped her out. Walking carefully in the dark, he led her up to the house. Natural stone formed the foundation, with natural wood for the outer walls. The house looked as if it had been carved out of the very spot in the forest where it sat.

"Come around to the other side." Again he led the way. The other side of the house



was almost all glass, rising from the foundation to the second story, offering a stunning view of the mountain valley before it.

"It's too beautiful for words," June said, gazing upwards. Then she smiled. "Who's going to wash these windows?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose I'll have to do it myself."

"I wouldn't be surprised." She walked close to the darkened building and peered inside. "It looks nearly finished. Why haven't you moved in?"

"I don't really know."

She turned, surprised. "You don't *know*? I don't understand."

"I don't either. The truth is, it feels too empty in there. I've actually thought about renting it out."

"Well, of course it feels empty. All new places feel empty. All you have to do is get busy and start bringing in furniture and pretty soon it's home, like magic. Get a dog. Get some refrigerator magnets. You'll see."

He shook his head sadly. In the moonlight, June saw the bleakness on his face. "I made a mistake, in building it. It's not furniture it needs. It's—I don't know—love and laughter, children, Christmas. I thought I could somehow create all that by building the house, but I was wrong. Happiness doesn't come with a house, it comes with a person you love."

June stood close to him, wanting to touch him. She sensed he was trying to tell her something. "You built this house with someone special in mind, didn't you?"

He stared at the ground. "I shouldn't dump my heartaches on you."

"Oh, go ahead. Do."

He looked at her. "Her name was Emily. She came with me from New York. I thought it was forever, I really did."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "She didn't reject me, but she rejected the town. She said she

couldn't exist without the bright lights and the noise of New York. She wanted me to go back with her."

"But by then you knew you couldn't go back." He nodded. June didn't know what to say. He'd been so happy and cheerful earlier, but now sadness seemed to weigh him down.

"June?" She looked directly at him. He reached out his hand and she took it, and then he pulled her close, not roughly, but insistent, not demanding, but hungry, and he kissed her. They finally stopped to catch their breath, then kissed again. And again. June felt out of touch with reality. She wanted Dan—desperately. She had never experienced anything like the desire she felt for him at that moment.

He apparently felt the same desire, but he controlled himself carefully. "Let me show you the inside of the house," he said, stepping away from her. She paused, not certain her weak legs would hold her up without support. "It's all right. There's no bed inside, so you don't have to worry."

"Okay, I'm right behind you."

In a minute, they were inside the house and Dan had turned on a light. The living room was vast, with a cathedral ceiling. The house smelled of fresh-cut cedar and the floor was polished pine. June followed him through the large bedrooms each with a sundeck, through the bathrooms with sunken tubs, and to the kitchen with three different ovens. June said, "There must be fifty cupboards in here."

"When I told my mother I was going to build my own house, she told me to put in as many cupboards as I possibly could. She said there's no such thing as too many cupboards."

"It's marvelous. Some woman is . . ." Her next words stuck in her throat.

Dan watched her closely. "Some woman is what?"

June moved away, opening cupboards.

"I don't know. Never mind."

"No, you were going to say some woman would be lucky to have this kitchen, weren't you?"

She looked at the floor, ceramic tile of a rich blue color. "Yes, that's what I was going to say."

"Do you mean it?"

"Well of course I—"

"June." She stopped opening cupboards and looked up at him. "Don't leave with May. Stay in Aspen. Work for me, or work with me, or work for someone else, but stay."

June laughed. "The *Edge* barely supports you. You can't afford an assistant."

"You can find work somewhere in town. Stay. Rent an apartment. I don't want to lose you."

"But Dan, this is all so fast."

"I know." He held her hands tightly. "But I feel if you leave with May, I'll never see you again. And I couldn't stand that."

"I—I need time to think."

She walked a little away from him, thinking about the hustle and bustle of May's life, always running to catch planes, hurrying from place to place, eating poorly and sleeping poorly. She had been growing tired of it for some time and now Dan was suggesting a restful alternative—a new job, a new place to live, and, most important, his company. "I suppose I could find another job," she said tentatively.

Dan walked to the giant window and gazed out into the darkness. "You've come into my life like a miracle. Don't leave it now."

"Dan, I have to catch my breath."

"I know. I'm rushing you, and I'm sorry." He stepped back from the window and put his hands in his pockets. "Think about it all you want—as long as you stay."

"If only there were more time. We're

supposed to leave tomorrow."

"Get away from her, June. Do something for yourself for a change." He came to her and hugged her gently.

"I don't know. I think you'd better take me back now."

"But you'll think about it?"

"Oh yes, I will definitely think about it."

Dan drove the Jeep back to town slowly. He stopped at the condominium and looked at her.

"Dan, this evening has been so special. I can't remember when I was this happy."

"It doesn't have to end. This is how it could be from now on. I didn't think this could happen to me again, but it has. I think I'm falling in love with you, June."

He drew her near and kissed her passionately.

"Good night," she whispered. In her heart, she had already decided. Dan wanted her. Aspen wanted her. She would stay.

May was already asleep when June tiptoed into the bedroom. The green dress was thrown haphazardly on the floor and June almost tripped over it. She sighed and picked it up, then washed her face and slipped into bed, exhausted yet restless. She tossed and turned for a long time, unable to sleep, too happy to let go of her thoughts.

It seemed like only minutes later when May was harshly shaking June's shoulder and demanding she wake up. "What is it?" June asked, rubbing her eyes. "A fire?"

"Not a fire, dummy, it's morning. You let us oversleep and we're going to miss our flight."

May did not sound happy. June glanced at her watch on the bedside table. It was only five-thirty, but May was right. They were supposed to catch a plane at five-thirty. "Since we've already missed it, we might as well sleep some more." She dropped her head to her pillow and closed her eyes.

"June, what's got into you? We've got to get to the airport and catch the next flight. You *know* we have a show in Salt Lake City tonight."

June groaned and rolled over, trying to bring her sleepy thoughts into focus. There was a knock on the door and May moved to open it. "That's probably the coffee I ordered for us," May said. "Get yourself up."

June sat on the edge of the bed trying to wake up. She heard May arguing with the person who had delivered the coffee, although she could not imagine what they were arguing about. When the argument continued, she pulled on a robe and went to see. On the floor in front of the door were three boxes marked, "Aspen Bakery." June picked up one box and opened it. It contained a dozen blueberry donuts. She smiled.

"This young man says he doesn't know anything about these boxes," May said. "Do you know something about them?"

"They were probably left by a friend of mine."

"Well, all right, then. Give him a tip and let him be on his way."

June paid for the coffee and the tip, then brought in the other two boxes of doughnuts. They were all blueberry. "What are we going to do with thirty-six blueberry donuts?" May asked.

"It's only thirty-five, now, and we're going to keep eating them, obviously."

May reached for another doughnut.

"June, how could you do this to me? You know I'm not supposed to eat stuff like this."

"So stop."

May looked at her carefully. "You're not yourself lately. Not since you came in yesterday afternoon. Not since you met the town bellringer. He must have really rung your chimes. What's going on?"

"I might as well tell you. I'm not going with you to Salt Lake City. I'm going to

stay in Aspen."

"June, have you lost your mind? You have a *job* to do!"

"I also have a life to live and I haven't been living it. I've been living *your* life and I'm tired of it."

"So you're going to just up and quit me? Just like that? Without a moment's warning?"

"It's not like that," June said.

"It most certainly *is*. Put that doughnut down and look at me. June, if you want to quit, if you want to do something else, *fine*. But you can't leave me like this in the middle of the tour. The thing to do—are you listening?—the thing to do is go on with me, we'll finish the tour and then when we're back in New York, we'll advertise for someone to replace you. Doesn't that make sense? Doesn't that seem better than abandoning ship?"

June looked down at the doughnut in her hand. She had been thinking only of herself, and May was right. It was common courtesy when quitting a job to give notice to allow the employer to find a replacement. Just because the employer was a sister was no reason to overlook the rules. She sighed, trying to remember how much longer this tour lasted. "All right," she finally said, "you win. But after this tour, that's the end. I'm coming back here and I don't want to hear any more arguments."

"I'm not going to argue. I only want to get to the airport."

June telephoned Dan's office. There was no answer, and she realized that she didn't have his home telephone number. After trying the office twice more, she wrote a note to him, explaining that she could not leave her sister in a difficult position, but that she would be back and he should wait for her if he possibly could. After the sweet understanding that had passed between them the night before, she felt certain he would be willing to wait.

She left the note taped to the front door, knowing Dan would come looking for her eventually.

She hated to leave, especially without seeing him, without saying goodbye, but it couldn't be helped. She followed June to the cab, which whisked them to the airport. In a short time, they were flying to Denver, where they would change planes and fly to Salt Lake City. June hoped she had remembered to pick up the green shoes.

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Over the next month, it seemed as if June's life were more hurried than ever. She telephoned Dan often, sometimes catching him at his office, sometimes leaving a message on his answering machine. She told him where she was and what she was doing, but the closeness they'd had seemed to be gone, as if the miles between them were straining their commitment to each other. Dan was patient, but distant, as if he didn't quite believe she intended to return.

She had never been so happy to see New York as when they finally touched down at JFK airport at the end of the month, the tour complete at last.

"I'm going to sleep for a week," June said in the cab on the way to their apartment.

"I'm going to sleep for *two* weeks," May said. She sighed. "Then I suppose I'll start all over again."

"Not me. I'm quitting, remember? I'm heading back to the mountains."

"Oh, June, I'd hoped you'd forget about that. Don't you know how much I need you?"

"Any competent person can do what I do."

"I guess so, but it's special because you're my sister. I think it means you do a little bit *more* for me, and I do appreciate it. I'll give you a raise if you stay."

"No, it's not the money. Nothing lasts

forever, May. It's time I found my own place and I'm pretty sure it's in Aspen."

"But you'll get bored there. You don't think so now, because you're tired. But after a few months of quiet life, you're going to want to get back to bright lights and city noise."

"No," June said, shaking her head. "You and I have always had a lot in common, but I'm not always like you. In school, I always liked to study at home, in peace and quiet, while you were out socializing. I don't think I'll be bored at all. I think I'll be very happy."

"But suppose your romance doesn't work out? Suppose he doesn't turn out to be the man you think he is?"

"It won't matter. I'm going for my own sake, not for the sake of the romance. If it doesn't work out, I'll do something else." She paused and smiled, remembering Dan. "But I think the romance is going to work out just fine."

"Well, I hope you think about it a lot before you make up your mind for good."

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Their rest period, unfortunately, lasted only two days. June had only had the opportunity to interview two people for the job when they received a frantic call from Reb Collier, the head of the recording company May had signed a contract with. It seemed her new album was not selling as well as they had anticipated. Now they wanted her to make a nationwide tour to promote the album with personal appearances.

Collier talked with May on the telephone while June listened on the extension. "This is ridiculous," May said. "I just got home from a tour for charity two days ago. I'm exhausted. I can't go on another one so soon. I simply can't."

"May," Collier said, "the word *can't* is for quitters. You're not a quitter. You're a winner. I know you, babe."

"The answer's still no, Reb. I'm simply

too tired."

"Well, I hate to have to do it this way, but business is business. If you read your contract, babe, you'll see that you *have* to do this for me. You signed on to do it. It's your job and I'm sure you don't want a lawsuit on your hands."

"I'm going to call my lawyer."

"Go right ahead. I called mine a long time ago, so I know what I can and can't do. I'll be back in touch with you tomorrow."

After he hung up, June joined her sister in the livingroom. "Let him sue you," June said. "You've got plenty of money."

"No," May said. "If I signed to do it, I'll do it." She sighed. "I'm sure I'll survive."

"Well, you'll do it without me."

May looked up. "Have you found a replacement?"

"You know I haven't. I've only interviewed two people and neither of them could handle it."

"You'd better find someone then. And if you don't, you better get packed."

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Following the terms of her contract, May had to leave the next afternoon. June had time to interview three more potential replacements, but none of them was remotely qualified to take over the job.

"You'll just have to postpone Aspen," May said that evening. "I understand you're unhappy about this, but there's nothing I can do about it. Do you know what would happen to me if you left me on my own?"

June did know. Lovely, sophisticated May would fall apart without her help. The energy required to maintain her star image left her no energy to take care of the details in her life. June sat down, depressed, and telephoned Aspen. Dan answered on the first ring.

"Dan? It's June."

"It's good to hear from you. The tour's

over, right? You're coming to Aspen?" He sounded so genuinely happy June hated to tell him the truth.

"I'm afraid there's going to be another delay." She explained the circumstances of May's contract, and the difficulties in finding someone to take her place.

Dan was angry. "I understand your sense of obligation, but enough is enough. June, you have your own life to lead."

"I know, I know. I promise, Dan, as soon as this tour is over, I'll be on the first plane to Colorado."

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The publicity tour to promote June's album was originally scheduled for two weeks, but it extended to a month. Every time they thought they were ready to go home, Red Collier came up with another city they had to visit. June became more and more unhappy about the situation, but the fact of her sister's dependence remained. As long as they were constantly on the move, there was not time to find a replacement road manager.

Often, on a flight from one nameless city to another, June would close her eyes and picture the peaceful mountain valley where Dan's house sat. Then she thought about all the skiers coming into Aspen day after day. Dan was lonely; he had said so himself. It was inevitable he would meet some attractive woman, and it wasn't fair to expect him to wait forever for her.

She telephoned as often as she could, but Dan sounded a little bit less enthusiastic each time she called. It was clear that he was beginning to doubt her word and she didn't blame him. She was beginning to doubt herself.

Collier finally ran out of places to send them and they found themselves unexpectedly on the Florida coast. June wanted to fly home immediately to begin packing for Colorado. But May was a jump ahead of her. "You'll never guess who's anchored at the dock," May said, bounc-

ing into their hotel room.

"Who?" June asked without much real interest.

"Prince Andre! He wants us to spend the weekend with him and some other people. It'll be a great rest for us."

"You don't need me for that. I'm flying to Colorado."

"June, I know I don't need you on the yacht, but I'd like for you to be with me. To protect me from Andre."

"Oh don't be silly. You're a big girl and Andre's not going to attack you against your will. He's much too polite for that."

"I know, but it will discourage him if you're with me. Look, it's only two more days. Then you can leave, I promise."

Two more days. It had been months now since she'd seen Dan. Two more days were not going to make much difference, and she didn't have the energy to argue with May. "All right, you win. Two more days. I'll call a cab to take us down to the dock."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. Andre will send a car for us—a limousine!"

"Whatever," June said, flopping down on the nearest bed. "Whatever."

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Half an hour later, she carried her luggage onto the deck of the *Nefertiti*, the prince's huge, private yacht. Andre's personal valet had come forward and graciously carried their luggage aboard.

After showing them to the cabin they would share, the valet explained the prince was tied up on business at the moment. The yacht was scheduled to sail in fifteen minutes, he said, and they would see the prince and his other guests at dinner at eight o'clock.

The valet was British, with a distinctive British attitude of snobbishness. "It will be a formal dinner," he told them, looking slightly down his nose. "I trust you have suitable attire."

As soon as he was out the door, June

stuck her tongue out and mimicked him. "I trust you have suitable attire."

May giggled. "We *do* have suitable attire, don't we? Will we know suitable attire when we see it?"

June considered for a moment. "You have the white dress with the sequined bodice."

"What about you?"

June shrugged. "I don't need to go. I'll just stay here and feel sorry for myself."

"Nonsense! This is as much a vacation for you as it is for me. Come on, June."

"I don't know. I'm tired and discouraged."

"What about the baby blue-chiffon?"

June made an effort to show some enthusiasm. "I suppose, if it's not too wrinkled."

"Well, come on, then. Who knows? There may be some very eligible young men as the prince's guests, not to mention the prince himself."

"I've already met the eligible young man I want."

"I'm not going to spend the afternoon arguing with you. Let's dig out the blue dress and see how it looks."

They decided the blue chiffon would be fine if they gave it a couple of hours to hang. The white dress was perfect as it was, and May had white shoes. June thought about taking a walk on the deck of the yacht, but decided she was too tired even for that. She lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

May woke her up in time to get ready for dinner. She was still tired. Her tiredness, she realized, was not simply physical. It had to do with pushing herself for too long in a direction she didn't want to go. It had to do with going away from a place and a person she had grown to cherish.

Waking herself up, she applied her makeup, adding a little extra blue eyeshadow to compliment the blue of her eyes

and the baby-blue dress. Finally she slid into the dress, scoop-necked with a flared skirt. May zipped her up and she zipped May.

"Aren't we a gorgeous pair!" May exclaimed when they were both ready.

"I'd rather be in jeans and a sweatshirt sitting in front of a fireplace in Colorado."

"Oh, stop being so grouchy and come on. Who ever heard of complaining because you have to attend a fancy dinner on a prince's yacht?"

They made their way to the dining room at eight o'clock exactly. Prince Andre greeted them at the door. He was an attractive man, June acknowledged, not so much handsome as polished and charming. He kissed May on the cheek while looking appreciatively at June.

"I don't think you've met my sister June," May said.

"Enchanted," the prince said, taking her hand. He looked at her directly, giving her all his attention. She had seen many photographs of him, but he was much more impressive in person. There was a certain energy about him that held June's attention. She understood why he was considered one of the world's most eligible bachelors.

"May, darling," Andre said, "why don't you circulate and let me talk privately with your lovely sister."

May flashed a brilliant smile and went her own way. Prince Andre was still holding June's hand. For a long moment, he studied her face. "I've known May for a long time," he said. "You are, perhaps, a different view of the same beautiful picture."

"We look similar," June said, "but our personalities are very different."

"You're not envious of her success, then?"

"I *pity* her success. It won't let her rest." She laughed. "It won't let *me* rest. I've been trying to escape for months, to

get away from that way of life. We've been on the road so long that a hotel room seems *normal*."

"You're tired."

"You're darn right, I'm tired. And I'm angry at May for dragging me along against my will."

"Perhaps when this little cruise is over, you will accompany me to Rio. I'll be playing in a polo tournament down there."

June laughed. "You're certainly impulsive. You've known me less than five minutes and you're inviting me to Rio?"

"I always go with my instincts, and I have very good instincts. You'd love Rio. It's like nowhere else on earth."

"Well, thank you, But as soon as we're back on land, I'm headed for Colorado. I'm going to live there."

"Ah, Colorado! An excellent place. One of our other guests is from Colorado. Come, I'll introduce you."

He took a few steps into the dining room and June started to follow, then froze in her tracks. He didn't need to introduce her to the other guest from Colorado. It was Dan.

He stood, dressed in a formal black suit, talking to May. As she stood staring at him, he suddenly shifted his attention and his gaze locked with June's.

Time froze and the entire universe existed in the space between them. But whatever Dan felt at the moment, he did not reveal it. His face was absolutely emotionless. June's heart pumped double time as Andre led her forward.

"Hello, June," Dan said when she was close enough to hear. His words had an icy tone. Wasn't he glad to see her?

"You don't know each other?" Andre asked, surprised.

"We met several months ago," Dan said but did not elaborate. There was no warmth in his voice.

"Isn't that just the strangest coincidence?" May said. "It's a small world,



isn't it?"

Everyone agreed it was a small world and June kept watching Dan, trying to understand his coldness. She couldn't help wondering if his presence on the yacht really was a coincidence, or if he had somehow engineered the meeting. She couldn't wait to get him away from the others so she could question him.

Unfortunately, Andre had no intention of letting the two of them be alone together. He steered June to the dining table and seated her next to him. She was more than a little annoyed to see Dan seated next to May. She tried not to look at them.

In all, there were four couples at the table. Andre introduced the others as Bruce and Janet, who were married, and Sam and Ellie, who were not. Dinner was six full courses, but June hardly tasted it. At first, as the dinner started, she caught Dan's eye fairly often. But as dinner went on, it seemed more and more of his attention was on May. June felt like stabbing her sister with a dinner fork. It was happening again—May was stealing another boyfriend.

In the meantime, the prince was as charming a host as June could imagine, working to draw her into the conversation, asking her questions about herself and seeming sincerely interested in the answers. If she hadn't been so distracted by Dan and May, she would have been more attentive to Andre, who went out of his way to be gracious.

Dinner finally ended with flaming *Crepes Suzette*, and the guests retired from the yacht's dining room to congregate in the living room for brandy. June felt bogged down from too much rich food and drink.

While Andre circulated among his guests and poured brandy, June saw Dan and her sister slip out onto the deck. I should trust them, she thought, but followed them anyway. She wasn't about to

let them be alone together in such a romantic setting. When she stepped out onto the deck, they stood at the railing, looking out at the sea together, their heads close. "May I interrupt?" June asked, trying to keep her voice even and reasonable.

"Why June!" May said. "You're not interrupting anything. We were simply appreciating the moonlight on the water. Isn't it gorgeous?"

"Yes, it is." June's eyes were drawn to Dan and she found he was watching her, too.

"Dan told me he met you clear back in Aspen," May went on. "He told me about the fake interview you gave him, with my answers."

"Did you ever print it?" she asked Dan.

"I sure did, and it was a great hit."

"He also told me he was responsible for the thirty-six blueberry doughnuts," May said. "How wicked it was of you to keep him away from me. Didn't you know I'd love him?"

"May, do you mind if I talk to Dan alone for a few minutes?"

"Oh, of course not. I need to be talking to some of these other folks anyway. Danny, I'll see you later, okay?" She was gone, sequins flashing in the cabin lights. June hated her for calling him Danny. She gripped the railing to get control of her runaway emotions.

Standing next to Dan, her heart beat madly. She remembered his every touch in Aspen, his kisses, but mostly she remembered the laughter they had shared. But Dan made no move to touch her now. How had all that magic disappeared? She turned and looked up at him. "Dan?"

He continued to stare out at the ocean. She tried again to talk to him. "I thought of you every day. I'm glad you're here."

"Are you?"

"Of course. Don't you believe me?"

"I'm having trouble believing anything you say."

June stared at him, realizing at last that he was very angry. He probably felt betrayed by her prolonged absence from his life. It wasn't fair, June thought. He didn't understand what she'd been through with May. "You're angry with me," she said softly.

"Not anymore," Dan said bitterly. "At first I was angry, and then I was hurt. Now I don't care."

The words cut cruelly. "Don't say that. You don't know how it's been. You don't know how I've tried to get back to you."

"I wanted to believe that, June. I wanted to believe you'd come back. I finally had to believe you, to see you in person."

"So here I am. So what's the problem?"

"You weren't planning to go to Aspen at all. Andre told me you were flying to Rio with him after this weekend."

June was stunned. "I told him no such thing! Dan, you misunderstood, or he misunderstood. You've got to believe me! Didn't May tell you how I've been trying to get loose from her?"

"Your charming sister chose to talk about herself rather than about you. She's much more open than you, by the way."

June knew he was deliberately trying to hurt her—and succeeding. "You don't know what you're saying. Dan, look at me, please. We have so much. Don't throw it away." She was very close to crying, barely holding on to what little control she had.

"It's not me," Dan said. "You threw it away, a long time ago. You walked out of my life without taking the time to even speak to me, and then you led me on for months. But like I said, I don't care anymore." He turned from her then and went inside, leaving her standing at the rail by herself. He simply didn't believe her efforts to get back to Aspen.

Devastated, she turned to look at the sea. The moonlight on the water was as beautiful as ever, but it meant nothing to

her now. For a brief, desperate moment, she considered throwing herself overboard. She imagined how the blue chiffon would float on the water's surface. But no, that wasn't the solution. She sniffed back her tears.

June went to her cabin to freshen her makeup. When she returned, soft music was playing and couples were dancing. May was dancing with Dan, of course. Andre came up to June and swept her onto the tiny dance floor. "I've been waiting for you." His eyes twinkled as he kissed her cheek and waltzed her around, light-footed and graceful.

"You're a wonderful dancer, Andre," June commented.

"It's part of the total package you get with Prince Andre. If you like to dance, I can promise you many more evenings of dancing, under the stars of Brazil. I'm still hoping to persuade you to accompany me to Rio."

"Did you tell Dan Files I was going with you?"

"Perhaps I hinted strongly. Did I do wrong?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Tell me about Rio." She watched Dan over Andre's shoulder. He seemed to be having an absolutely marvelous time with May, but then who wouldn't? May was sensational and always had been. If May wanted Dan, and it was beginning to look as if she did, then June could kiss him goodbye.

She tried to drag her attention back to Andre. "Rio is marvelous," he said. "Everyone there works extra hard to please you, so you will come back. They do anything for you. You meet no surly bellhops. Everyone is gracious."

"So you'll fly down to Rio, you'll play polo, you'll dance the night away."

"You forgot to mention dining *al fresco* at Rio's finest restaurants, and lying on the beach during the day. Anything you want to do. You must come with me."

June tried to imagine life as a permanent holiday. "Are you going to live that way forever? Haven't you thought about settling down?"

"Why should I? I have my health, I have the means to travel and I love it. Perhaps someday in the distant future I'll grow tired of constantly moving, but it won't be for a long time."

"You've never been in love, have you?"

"No, you're wrong there. I was in love, once, many years ago."

"What happened?"

"The woman I loved was much older. I was nineteen, she was forty. You talk of settling down. I would have settled down in a second with Eva. I would have married her if she would have had me. But with the wisdom of age, she knew it wouldn't work. She let me down as easily as she could."

They danced on, smoothly, without a misstep. "And you," Andre said. "Have you ever been in love?"

June remembered Dan asking her that very same question. Her answer then had been about Jed. Now it was about Dan. "Yes, I've been in love."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I thought he loved me too, but now I'm not so sure."

"You sound very sad." When she didn't reply, he said, "I'd like to make it better for you."

"Maybe you can," she murmured, trying to picture herself flying to Rio with this kind and charming man. But she kept substituting Dan's face in every picture. "Andre," she suddenly said, "how did Dan Files come to be aboard tonight?"

It took him a moment to shift his thoughts to Dan. "Dan? I met him a year or more ago in Aspen. Have you been there? Lovely town."

"Yes, it is. So you met Dan. Then what happened?"

"I simply told him, if he ever wanted a

vacation away from his mountain paradise, he should look me up. Last week he called me and here he is."

"And what about May and I? Did Dan say anything to you about us? About wanting to see us?"

"Now June, we men have few secrets among ourselves. I certainly can't tell you everything. Besides, I promised Dan I wouldn't."

"So there is something going on. Surely he didn't come all this way just to snub me. This is very important to me, Andre. It's not some little game I'm playing."

"I understand that. If you want the truth, I suggest you talk to Dan directly."

"I'd like to, but he doesn't want to talk to me."

"He does seem to be taken with your sister, doesn't he? I can understand that. I was taken with her myself at one time."

"Please, the last thing I need to hear is praise of my sister's charms. I'd like to hear something you *don't* like about her."

"Ah, but that would not be dignified for me to say unkind things about her. And it would not be dignified for you to listen. Forget about May. Forget about Dan. Come with me to Rio."

She shook her head. "Maybe. That's the best I can do for now." Andre smiled and accepted her answer, but when he kissed her neck she felt she was being persuaded. She wanted so much to be in Dan's arms, but it was looking more and more like those arms were closed to her forever.

Dan was probably right, she thought. She probably hadn't tried hard enough to get away from May while she was on the road. But her constantly-moving life gave her a distorted sense of reality. She didn't realize how much time was passing. While Dan had been sitting month after month waiting for her, it had seemed like only a few weeks to her. The time flew by and one day faded into the next. Why

couldn't Dan understand that?

She kept her chin up throughout the evening, but it hurt her deeply to see Dan continue to enjoy himself with May.

The party finally began to wind down at sometime after midnight. June escaped from Andre with a single kiss—she knew he was willing to give her much more—and found her way to the cabin she shared with May.

She made it a point not to look at May when she came in quite a bit later. If May's lipstick was smeared, June didn't want to know it. If May's face looked dreamy or joyful, she didn't want to see it. She turned over in bed, keeping her back to her sister.

"Why June James," May said dreamily, "what a fine man that Dan Files is. Why on earth did you ever let him get away from you?"

June clenched her teeth and restrained herself from pointing out it was May's fault he had gotten away. Hurtful words would do no good for anyone. "I'm going to sleep," June said lifelessly.

"I want to talk," May said, wide awake. "I want to talk about Dan."

"What's to talk about? He's marvelous. You like him, he likes you. That's enough." She turned over and turned over again, trying to get comfortable while May lay sprawled across the bed.

"A man like that could make a girl rethink her priorities," May said. "A man like that could really make a girl want to settle down."

June closed her eyes, her fists closing over the sheet and blanket on the bed. She had hoped against hope that May would consider Dan only an evening's entertainment, so that June would have a chance to win him back.

"He has a great sense of humor," May mused, stretching on the bed.

"Please," June said. "I'm very tired. I don't want to discuss Dan. I just want to

go to sleep."

May sat up. "Why are you so cranky? Are you angry with me? Because I didn't see your name attached to him."

June threw back the covers and went into the small bathroom, slamming the door behind her. May stepped up close to the door. "I wish you would tell me if you're angry with me."

June swept the door open again. "Yes, I'm angry! I'm angry because you made me stay with you when I wanted to go to Dan and I'm angry that you've been controlling my life for years and I'm angry that you've taken Dan away from me and I'm also angry that you took *Jed* away from me—you probably don't even remember *Jed*, but I do—years and years ago. He was my boyfriend and you took him and I'm tired of it. All right? Is that enough?" She slammed the door shut again.

May didn't say anything else. June brushed her teeth again for something to do. She waited for a long time and when she finally came out of the bathroom, the light was off and May was in bed.

"You'd better get up and wash your face," June said.

"I don't need you to tell me how to run my life."

"That's a laugh. Every time I turn around, you tell me how much you need me."

"You make it sound like I've been a first-class bitch."

"If the shoe fits, May."

"I don't want to fight with you."

"Go to sleep, then. Move over. You always take more than your share of the covers."

And of everything else, June thought.

It was much later. June didn't know how long she'd been asleep but she was suddenly awakened by a loud pounding on the door. May sat up rubbing her eyes

as June slipped out of bed and opened the door. Andre was outside. June read worry on his uncharacteristically white face.

"Sorry to have to wake you, ladies, but we've encountered a bit of a nasty storm." May came up behind June. "There's probably nothing to worry about," Andre continued, "but I'd feel better if you'd get dressed and put on your life jackets. You'll find them under the bed."

"Andre," May said, "surely you don't expect me to get into the cold wet ocean."

"Of course not, love. This is merely a precaution. One of the prices you pay for being part of the Jet Set. Tomorrow we'll all have a good laugh over it."

He moved away to wake other guests. June immediately went through her luggage searching for her jeans and a warm sweater. "It doesn't seem very bad," May commented. "I mean the boat's not rocking very much or anything. Do you suppose it's a joke?"

"I suppose you'd better get out of that nightgown and do as Andre said." As if to emphasize her words, the yacht made a rolling dip to the right.

"Oh shoot," May said, reaching for the nearest wall to steady herself, "whose idea was it to come on this stupid cruise, anyway?"

"Yours, of course."

"It's always me, isn't it." May struggled to get into her clothes. The yacht was rocking more and more violently. "Listen, sis, if anything happens . . ."

"Nothing's going to happen."

"I know, but just in case—I want you to know I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you. I had no idea Dan was the man you loved. But even so, I really have been selfish. One of the problems with being a success is that you stop questioning your judgment. You assume everything you do and say is right. But I've been wrong, the way I've been using you. I'm really genuinely sorry."

June looked at her sister, then gave her a quick hug. She couldn't stay mad at May. "You haven't always used me," June said. "Remember when I broke mother's sugar bowl and you took the blame? I never knew why you did that but I always remembered it and appreciated it."

"I did it because I knew my punishment would be lighter than yours. It wasn't right, but that's the way it was. I've had a golden life, June, I really have."

June heard the edge of panic in her sister's voice, and knew May was close to tears. "Let's get your life jacket on, kid."

"Are these designer life jackets? I don't know if I should be seen in public like this."

"You certainly look buxom. I'm afraid we're going to have to live with them. Let's go to the lounge and see if Andre needs any help."

The fury of the storm became more apparent as they made their way forward. They heard the wind shrieking and it became necessary to hold on to the side rails as they walked. June tried to pretend she wasn't scared, but when they got to the lounge, they saw spray from the waves hitting the porthole windows.

Bruce and Janet and Sam and Ellie were all in the lounge, all buckled into life jackets. Only Andre and Dan were missing. Everyone paced nervously.

"Where's Andre?" May asked.

"Driving, of course," Ellie said, and everyone laughed.

"You don't say *driving*," Sam corrected. "Say steering."

"It's the same thing, isn't it? Oh, why didn't we stay on good, solid land?"

June was wondering the same thing, but she felt she ought to help out rather than panic. "I don't think there's much to worry about," she said firmly. "We're not that far out to sea and the Coast Guard knows our location. So even if we should get a bit wet, it wouldn't be for long."

"But there might be sharks!" Ellie cried. "I'm terrified of sharks."

"Sharks don't attack during a storm," June said with authority. Actually she didn't have the slightest idea if sharks attacked during storms or not, but it sounded good and made Ellie feel better.

Conversation continued as everyone tried to remain cheerful and optimistic. June wondered where Dan was. She thought he must be with Andre, giving him moral support or something. Maybe Dan was even driving—*steering*—the yacht. She wished he were there with the rest of them. In spite of her brave talk, she was very frightened and every bit as afraid of sharks as Ellie.

"The best thing for us to do," Sam said, "is to stay calm and be ready to do whatever Andre tells us."

"Do you think there are lifeboats?" Janet asked.

"Of course there are," June said. "They're probably the best lifeboats money can buy. You know Andre. The lifeboats are probably stocked with champagne and caviar. He sure wouldn't want to get caught on the open sea without champagne."

Janet laughed. "I'm glad you're here," she told June. "I wish I were half as brave as you."

Time seemed to crawl as they waited for the storm to let up. But instead of easing, it seemed to get worse and worse. June began to wish Andre or Dan would come down and tell them what was going on. What if both of them had been swept overboard? The yacht began to roll back and forth more violently and some of the others began to complain of seasickness.

Janet wanted to take her life jacket off when she became ill, but Bruce and June convinced her to keep it on. Somewhere along the line, June realized she was the calmest, most sensible person in the room. She supposed she had learned to

stay calm through all the years she'd spent with May. The numerous crises she'd faced—and overcome—had served to toughen her and make her more prepared to handle this situation.

June had almost made up her mind to go in search of Dan and Andre when Dan appeared in the lounge, his face white and worried. His eyes sought June and for a long moment their gazes locked and held. June still could not tell what he was thinking or feeling. He turned from her abruptly.

"I'm sorry, folks," Dan said, "Andre is afraid he can't keep this boat upright very much longer. He's asked me to break out the lifeboats and to have you come up on deck. The cook and the rest of the staff and crew are already loading into one of the lifeboats."

"Why can't we stay here until something happens?" Janet asked.

Dan shook his head. "If the *Nefertiti* turns over, you could be trapped underwater. I'm sorry. We've got to do as Andre advises."

Janet began to cry and June went to her. "Come on, now, it's not so bad. The worst that's going to happen is you'll have to have your hair done again." The boat rolled dangerously to one side and was a long time righting itself again. June glanced at Dan and he nodded. "Let's get up on deck," June said. "It'll be great, you'll see. Fresh air, ocean breezes, all the things you wanted on a cruise."

On the deck, the wind hit with tremendous force and they were soaked immediately from rain and ocean waves. Andre was still struggling valiantly to keep the boat from sinking; but when June saw the size of the waves, she could only marvel that he'd kept it upright as long as he had.

"All right," Dan said, "there's two lifeboats left. Ladies first." June looked at him. She didn't want to get in the lifeboat and leave him behind, but there was no

time for discussion. She helped the other three women into the lifeboat and then her eyes sought Dan's once more. Again he watched her, but his expression remained unreadable.

June stepped into the lifeboat and signaled Dan to lower them into the sea. The other three women clung to each other, crying. "Hold on to the side ropes, girls," June said. "We're going in."

The ocean immediately splashed over them when they hit the surface of the water, but they were already so wet and cold it made little difference. June took command of their small craft. "Ellie and Janet, take these buckets and bail. May, you and I will row—away from the boat. We've got to get clear of it before it sinks." June could hardly hear her own voice in the wind and rain. "Come on now, girls, shape up! Get busy!"

Under June's direction, the other women made themselves useful. They were exhausted in no time at all, but June drove them to continue. Twice she looked back, searching for signs of the other lifeboats, but the black night had swallowed them and they could see nothing.

Janet was showing signs of giving up. "Keep bailing," June insisted, although her own arms and back were aching and she couldn't remember ever being so tired. It would have been easy to give up, to slip into the icy water and let it take her away for a long rest. But she made herself stay alert and made her aching muscles continue to work.

The storm seemed to go on forever, but finally, much later, June noticed the rain and wind were letting up their relentless attack. She wondered how long they'd been in the lifeboat. Two hours? Three? The raft was no longer pitching about wildly, but beginning to float calmly. A thin line of light appeared on the horizon. Somehow they had made it through to morning.

That thin line of light grew into a glorious band of gold, lighting the world. June made a quick check of the others. May, Ellie and Janet were huddled together, sleeping after their exhausting night, but each woman had one hand firmly attached to the side ropes of the raft.

June realized she, too, was gripping a rope. She had to pry her fingers loose from it. Slowly she raised her aching arms above her head, stretching, wishing there were more room. She was wet and cold, but the sun was rising rapidly. Soon they would feel its warmth. Soon the Coast Guard would pick them up.

But where was Dan? She strained her eyes in all directions, hoping to see another bright yellow raft. There was nothing to see—no raft, no wreckage of the *Nefertiti*, no land, nothing except the sun rising. She began to wonder if they had drifted out to sea. How far could a raft travel in a storm? Would the Coast Guard be able to tell where they were from last night's wind direction?

Feeling the first touch of the sun's warmth, May stirred, then slowly sat up. "My God, June, we're alive!"

"Of course. I told you we'd make it."

"Ellie? Janet? Wake up, girls. Look, we're alive!"

The sun rose and their spirits rose with it as their clothes began to dry and the sun warmed them. "Where's that champagne and caviar you promised?" Janet asked.

"It must have washed overboard," June said, smiling. "What we *do* have is fishing line and other survival gear tucked in a pocket of the raft."

"I'm not quite desperate enough for raw fish," Janet said.

"Think of it as sushi," May advised.

They never did grow desperate enough to eat raw fish. By mid-morning, they heard the sound of a helicopter and they all cheered as the pilot saw them and hovered nearby to check their condition. "I'll



send a boat for you," he promised through a loud speaker. "Hold on for half an hour."

The women waved happily; the pilot's word was good. In half an hour, a Coast Guard boat appeared and they were soon safely on deck and heading for land. June looked around, hoping Dan might be aboard, but he wasn't.

"What about the rest of our party?" she asked the guardsman who helped them on board. "Have they been rescued?"

"I can't tell you, ma'am. I just came on duty a few minutes ago."

"Can you find out? Can you ask your captain or somebody? It's very important."

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

The Coast Guard boat did not have pancakes, but it did have coffee. Janet, Ellie and May all went below for coffee while June stood at the rail, hoping. She had to face the possibility that Dan had not made it. The emptiness in her heart was deeper and stronger than anything she'd ever felt. The wind whipped her blond hair as she stood looking out to sea, alone and afraid.

She might have stayed there for the entire journey, but May appeared and dragged her sister below for coffee. June was too tired to resist. She accepted a cup and sat down. "Have they heard anything about the others?" she asked hopefully.

"No," May said, "they don't know if they've been found or not. There's still hope." June nodded and closed her eyes.

Half an hour later, the Coast Guard boat arrived in port. Janet and Ellie started for the deck immediately, with May following and June trailing behind. She paused for a moment to thank the young guardsman who had helped them, and then climbed onto the deck. Andre, Dan, and the others were waiting on the dock.

June's heart jumped at the sight of Dan. She felt almost weak with relief. She stepped toward the dock carefully, trying to sort out her emotions running in all di-

rections. Dan was alive—that was most important. But Dan didn't care about her anymore—could that really be true?

Stepping onto the dock, she saw him coming toward her. His face was no longer unreadable. She knew by the concern she saw there that he *did* still care for her, that he had never stopped. Without hesitation, she walked straight into his waiting arms.

"Dan, I'm so sorry."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize. I'm the one who's been wrong. May told me last night how you tried to get back to Aspen. I was just too proud and stubborn to admit I was wrong, and I almost lost you for good. June, I was so afraid—not of dying, but of not being able to tell you how much I loved you."

"I was afraid, too, afraid of having you think I betrayed you."

"No, I knew in my heart you must love me. I came here to find you. I asked Andre to invite you onto his yacht just so I could convince you to come back to Aspen." He paused and leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Last night, I got even more confused, with the idea of you going off to Rio with Andre. But it's all sorted out now. Please say you'll come back to the mountains with me."

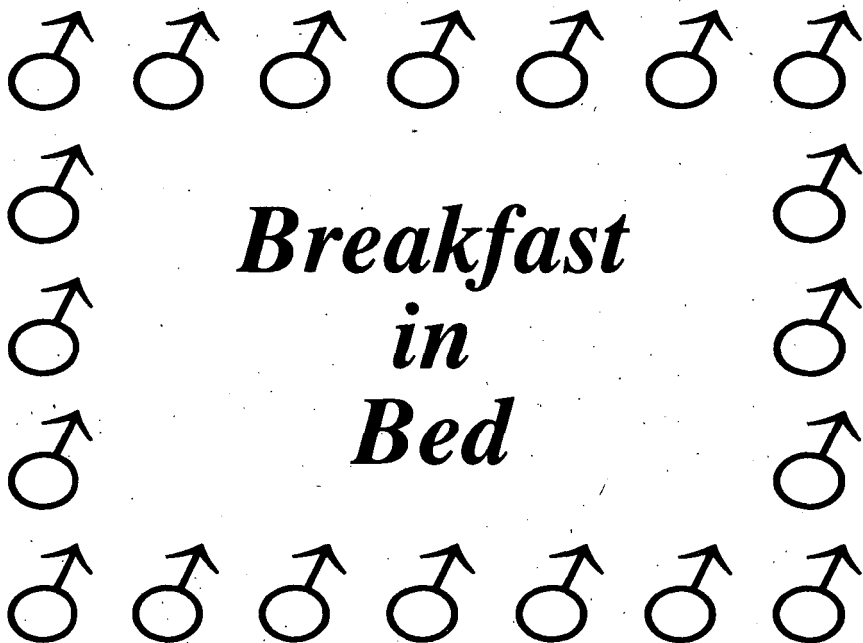
She wiped her tears. "Oh Dan, you don't need to ask me again. Let's get started right away."

"What about May?"

"May's going to have to take care of herself, from now on. I want to think about myself for awhile."

"About *us*?"

"Us," she amended with a smile. ♥



# *Breakfast in Bed*

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*Sloan Fairchild is happy with her safe life as owner of a bed and breakfast establishment until handsome writer Carter Madison storms in and steals her heart.*

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SANDRA BROWNE

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**T**he moment she saw him, she knew it had been a mistake to grant Alicia's favor.

There he stood on the porch of Fairchild House with his suitcase in one hand, his portable typewriter in the other, his narrow-framed tortoise shell eyeglasses on top of his head, looking a trifle sheepish for obviously having gotten her out of bed.

And there she was, Sloan Fairchild, owner and proprietor of the bed and break-

fast establishment, standing just inside the arched front door clutching her robe to her throat with white-knuckled fingers and shifting from one bare foot to the other.

With her first look into Carter Madison's face, her stomach lurched, tightened, then stumbled over itself on its rolling descent to the cushiony floor of her torso.

"Ms. Fairchild?" he asked.

Her head bobbed up and down stupidly.

"Carter Madison. I got you out of bed,

didn't I?"

Her tousled hair, her attire, and her bare feet were dead giveaways. "I . . . I thought you'd arrive earlier in the day. Come in."

She moved aside, opening the thick oak door wider. He dragged himself and the cases he carried through the passage. "Didn't Alicia call you?"

"No."

"I'm sorry," he sighed. "She was supposed to call and tell you I'd be late." He set his cases on the floor and flexed his shoulders.

"It doesn't matter. Really."

He straightened to his full height and looked down at her. Eyes, so unusual she'd never seen the like before, collided with hers. Even the faint glow shed by the night lights she kept on in the hallways reflected their light brown, sherry color. They were outlined by thick lashes the same rich, mahogany color of his hair that was streaked with burnished highlights.

"I hate to have inconvenienced you by getting you out of bed. Alicia said you were reluctant to have me staying here in the first place." His lopsided grin was a little too self-confident, a little too cocky, and absolutely captivating.

Sloan self-consciously pushed back a wayward strand of hair and willed that unprecedented disturbance in the lower part of her body to go away. "Not you specifically, Mr. Madison," she replied in a voice she hoped sounded crisply efficient. "Most bed and breakfast houses are managed by a couple. Since I'm a single woman, I've restricted my guests to only couples or women traveling together. I agreed to let *you* stay here only because you're my best friend's fiance and she asked me to house you for a month so you could write the last chapter of your novel before the wedding."

"*Sleeping Mistress*."

"Pardon?"

"*Sleeping Mistress*. That's the title of

the book."

"Oh."

"Have you read my books?"

"Yes."

"Did you like them?"

"Parts of them I—"

"Which parts?"

"Most parts," she said, laughing at his probing curiosity. Her answer pleased him, but his smile became a little too warm, a little too personal for her already reeling senses. "I think it's wonderful about you and Alicia," she interjected quickly.

"She's a terrific lady."

"Yes she is. I thought . . . never mind."

"Go on. You thought what?"

"Well, I thought she'd never recover after Jim got killed. She and the boys took his death so hard. When I talked to her the other day, she sounded very happy. You're responsible. I know you handled most of the legal ramifications for her after his death."

"I was in China at the time of the accident. As soon as I could, I came home. Jim Russell had been my best friend for years. It wasn't a chore, but an honor to look after his widow for him."

To the point of marrying her? Sloan wanted to ask. This time she kept silent. She'd made the mistake of broaching the subject with Alicia.

"This marriage means so much to me, Sloan," Alicia had said. "Ever since Jim . . . well, you know how lonely I've been and what a handful the boys are for me. Carter's been terrific, patient with them and me, but he's about at the end of his rope, too, I think we need a break from each other before we take that final plunge."

"Alicia," Sloan had said hesitantly, "do you love Carter?"

There was a noticeable pause before Alicia responded in clipped phrases. "Of course I do, I've always adored Carter. He

and Jim were best friends. He wants to take care of the boys and me. He loves us and we adore him."

"I know, I know," Sloan had said, impatient with her friend's failure to see the point she was trying to make. "You've told me a hundred times how he and Jim grew up together, went to school together, how like brothers they were. But is that reason enough to marry him? He's not Jim, Alicia."

"I'll never love anyone the way I loved Jim, but I love Carter in a different way. Because of what Jason did to you, you're bitter and skeptical about any relationship between a man and a woman. That's why you've locked yourself away in that old house of yours and haven't looked at a man in the two years since that jerk jilted you."

Shaking herself out of her reverie, Sloan said briskly, "I don't know why I've kept you standing in the hall. I'm sure you're ready to go up to your room. Let me get the key." Grateful for an excuse she turned toward her office at the back of the stairs. He halted her.

"I hate to trouble you any more than necessary, but I'm starving. They served peanuts on the flight. Is there a chance that a paying guest could coax a merciful hostess out of a bowl of cornflakes? Or anything. I'm not particular."

"I served pot roast for dinner. Would a roast beef sandwich suit you?"

"You're talking to a man who would have settled for cornflakes," he said, placing one hand over his heart.

Trying not to notice how adorable he was, Sloan led the way to the kitchen as Carter pulled off his jacket. She turned on the light and fairly flew into getting him his snack. It included not only a sandwich, but leftover fruit salad, a piece of chocolate layer cake, and a tall glass of milk, which he said he preferred to coffee. She knew his eyes were following her as

she flitted around the kitchen, intent on her chore and cursing her unaccountable nervousness.

They both sat at the kitchen table, and Sloan drank a glass of milk as she watched him eat.

"It's funny that I was Jim's best friend and you're Alicia's and yet we've never met. Why weren't you at their wedding?"

She dragged her eyes from the corner of his mouth, a spot that intrigued her. "Uh . . . I was in Egypt."

"You went all the way to Egypt just to avoid attending the wedding?"

She laughed. "No. My parents are Egyptologists. They coerced me into going on a three-month trip with them. Alicia threatened, cried, and pleaded, but there was no help for it. I'd promised my parents I'd go and it was too expensive to come back for the wedding."

"Did you like Egypt?"

"It was all right." Actually she'd hated every minute she was there. It had been her parents' trip of a lifetime. Her father, a professor of history at UCLA, and her mother, who had been his research assistant before becoming his wife, had persuaded Sloan to travel with them.

As she'd feared, she'd been to them away from home what she was to them at home, an unpaid servant. She handled their travel arrangements, saw to their packing, their clothes, their appointments. As it had always been, when they weren't totally involved with their work, they were totally involved with each other to the exclusion of everything, even their daughter.

"What did you do before Fairchild House?"

She attributed his prying questions to his writer's curiosity. Her personal history would be boring to him and it was painful for her, so she kept her answers polite and general. "I worked for a company in Burbank that manufactures and markets of-

fice supplies."

"And you left all that for this beautiful old house in San Francisco?"

His eyes were teasing, dancing with amber lights.

"Well it was a tremendous sacrifice." She drew a sad face, then they laughed together. It felt good.

"How did you acquire the house?"

"It was almost an incidental item in my grandfather's will. My parents had no interest in it. I came up here to see it and knew at once what I wanted to do."

She had returned to Los Angeles, quit her job, notified her parents of the turn her life was going to take, and made the move all within a matter of weeks. "It took every penny of the money Grandfather had left me to have the place restored. It was in deplorable condition."

"But right off Union Street? My God, that was lucky."

"It was in the shadow of a ramshackle warehouse or I'm certain someone would have tried to buy it from us before then. Grandfather had owned it since the thirties, but it had been vacant for years. The warehouse has since been torn down. So I'm sitting on a prime piece of real estate, if the taxes are any indication. But in essence, it didn't cost me anything."

He glanced around the modernized kitchen that Sloan had had to redo from the foundation up. "You've done a remarkable job. The house is great."

"Thank you. Now if I can only keep my head above water until I start making a profit . . ."

"I thought you'd be like Alicia," Carter said suddenly. "You're not."

Sloan was dismally aware of that. Alicia had been a campus beauty queen at UCLA when she and Sloan had become friends. Blonde, blue-eyed, rounded and dimpled, Alicia had often made Sloan feel like a diluted washout.

Sloan's hair was dark blond, threaded

with lighter streaks in varying shades. Her eyes were the color of the sky seen through smoked glass. Sloan's figure was just as shapely as her friend's, but with all the excess flesh trimmed away.

"I don't think anyone could argue that," she said lightly now, trying to dismiss the thorough way Carter was looking at her as a characteristic of his career. Writers were constantly gathering material, weren't they? "Alicia's beautiful."

"So are you."

She bolted out of her chair and bumped her thighs bruisingly on the table in the process. "Thank you. Would you like something else?" she asked nervously, wishing her hands wouldn't tremble as she reached for his dishes.

"No thank you. It was delicious."

She carried the dishes to the sink and ran water over them. "I'll take you to your room now." She rushed past him, wishing she hadn't noticed how well his shirt fit his torso as he stood and slung his jacket over his shoulder.

"I can't tell you how wonderful it's going to be to get in some uninterrupted work," Carter said as he followed her to her office, where she retrieved a key that was labeled with his room number.

"I wondered why you couldn't finish your book in L.A. Alicia said that's where the two of you will be living. I assumed you had a place there."

"I do. Right on the beach. Lovely place. It has everything."

"Then—"

"Including a telephone. And everyone has the number. Alicia's mother calls and asks if I know what color dress my mother plans to wear to the wedding. When I suggest she call her she says, 'Oh, but I hate to bother her.' Then Alicia's father calls and asks me to lunch to meet some of his friends and I tell him I'm working and he says, 'But you have to eat sometime.' And then Alicia calls and then David and then

Adam—"

"What about after you're married and have to work? It won't get any easier."

"Yes, but *then* I can yell."

They laughed softly together for a moment, and when it subsided a sense of intimacy came between them, making them each aware of the other.

"Alicia said you'd be working almost all the time." She hoped that frantic note in her voice went past him undetected. "I believe you have only the last chapter to go."

They were at the foot of the stairs now, but he made no move to pick up either the suitcase or the typewriter that he'd left there. When he'd been eating, his eyeglasses had remained perched on his head. Now, he flopped them down over his eyes again, but rather than to facilitate his seeing, it was so he could rake a hand through his hair. "Yeah, but it's a killer."

"Don't you know how the book is going to end?"

"Yes, but I've got to do the scene where the hero overcomes the villain and the last love scene between the two protagonists."

"That shouldn't be too difficult when you're able to concentrate. You're very good with the suspense scenes, and I'm sure that with a title like *Sleeping Mistress* the love scene will be no problem."

His grin was wide. "But the sleeping mistress isn't a woman."

"It's a man?" she asked.

"Not with a Carter Madison hero," he said, trying to look offended. "No, the word mistress refers to his sense of duty. It's his passion, what drives him, what makes him tick. It fades from importance when he meets the heroine and he no longer lets it govern his decisions. It doesn't reassert itself until the final pages." He was looking at her so intently that Sloan lowered her eyes.

"I'll take you up now," she managed.

"Sloan." Had he not closed strong fin-

gers around her wrist to detain her, his speaking her name for the first time would have accomplished it just as effectively. "I'm perfectly capable of finding my room. No need for you to bother." He took the key from her limp hand.

"Then I'll see you at breakfast." Could he feel the pulse racing beneath the pad of his thumb? "I serve between seven-thirty and nine-thirty."

"Do you serve breakfast in bed?"

"If . . . if a guest prefers not to come down to the dining room, I can bring a tray to his . . . her . . . their room."

"I prefer."

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It was the next morning and Sloan wasn't sure what she was doing walking into Carter's room, a tray in her hands.

"You'd better eat this while it's hot." She indicated the tray with a nod of her head. When he hadn't answered her knock, why hadn't she gone back downstairs and tried again later? Possibly he would have pulled on a shirt by then. As it was, all he wore now was a pair of jeans. The sight of his naked chest was doing nothing to eliminate the vertigo she'd been subjected to since she first saw him.

"Join me?" he asked.

"No," she said too loudly and too quickly. He was pulling on a shirt, thank God. "The other guests are in the dining room. I have to be on hand if they need something."

"And I don't deserve the same attention?"

The arching brow that couldn't seem to keep still no matter what the mood was dancing with mirth. He was teasing her, being deliberately provoking, and her frazzled nerves couldn't handle it. "Yes," she said with a touch of asperity. "But it should be obvious that I can't be two places at once and since they are six and you are one, majority rules. You requested the tray in your room. Maybe you should re-

consider next time."

She was convinced that she hadn't slammed the door behind her, but the rattle of the windows said otherwise. "This is all Alicia's fault," she muttered.

Just beyond the archway into the dining room, Sloan paused to draw in several restorative breaths and paint on a gracious hostess smile before she went in. "More orange muffins for everyone?" she asked her guests.

"Yes," they chorused.

When she had refilled everyone's coffee cup, she went back into the kitchen to sip at her own.

In the nine months Fairchild House had been open, she'd survived only by word of mouth. Just when she'd think she'd be forced to close, someone would call at the recommendation of a previous guest. There were several well-known bed and breakfast houses in San Francisco, but Sloan's was the newest. By next spring, she hoped to have ads running in travel magazines and the Sunday editions of major city newspapers. In the meantime, she was living on a shoestring, barely breaking even, but she was surviving.

At the time she'd left her boring job and moved to San Francisco, that had been her main objective: to survive. Her engagement to Jason Hubbard had come to a crushing, irrevocable termination. Her parents sadly lamented her disappointment in love and then returned to their dusty books and charts.

In short, no one cared what she did with the rest of her life. Not her parents. Not Jason—laughing, handsome Jason—who had stolen her heart, her virginity, then one night blithely told her she was too staid, that he needed someone with more energy, more excitement. Only she had known that if she stayed where she was, doing what she was doing, she'd vegetate.

It hadn't been easy, but with the money her grandfather had willed her, her degree

in business from UCLA, her love of cooking, and a wish and a prayer, she'd undertaken to make something of Fairchild House.

She took secret pride in what she'd accomplished even if no one else had noticed. Other women had a man, children, to occupy their lives. They could afford to be romantic, impractical, and sometimes irresponsible. Because they knew their man would take care of them.

This morning her deficiencies where romance was concerned seemed more deficient than usual. Could her despondency have something to do with the recently rainy weather? Or was its source the man upstairs? But then that was unthinkable. He belonged to her best friend and even if he didn't, a man of his caliber, his worldwide notoriety, would never be attracted to someone like her.

Nevertheless, it took a long time before she built up enough courage to retrieve his breakfast tray.

When she finally went in to pick it up, she foolishly remarked that she was heading to the wharf to buy crab for dinner, and Carter insisted on accompanying her.

Her usual astuteness failed her, and she couldn't think fast enough to manufacture a reason for him not to go with her. They didn't need another reason when the prevalent one was prohibitive enough. They shouldn't be playing with fire when obviously one ignited every time they were together. It was too late, however. Carter had already yanked the fatigue jacket from a hanger in the closet and pulled open the door to his room.

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Sloan was accustomed to the perilously steep streets and the San Franciscan drivers who treated traffic lights as flashing decorations to be disregarded when at all possible. When she pulled into a covered parking space near Fisherman's Wharf, Carter was a trifle pale, making three



freckles on his cheekbone stand out starkly. "Are we here? I hope."

Sloan laughed at him. "Come on. As long as you insisted on tagging along, you can make yourself useful."

He helped her pick out the freshest, whitest crabmeat, sworn to have been brought in with the latest catch. She made her other necessary stops as they walked along the wharf, but she was often distracted.

"Come look at this, Sloan," he would call. Or, "Wait, let's go in here. I've been in this gallery before and it's terrific."

While she tried to make it seem like the outing were for business alone, she had the distinct impression that given half a chance, Carter would have made it into a lark.

When she accused him of that as she guiltily bit into her Ghirardelli chocolate bar, he said, "How often do you get out? I mean for fun and relaxation, not on an errand for Fairchild House." He was unself-consciously slurping a gooey sundae as they sat at a small round table in the atrium room of an ice cream parlor.

She fiddled with her candy wrapper. "I'm the sole owner and manager of Fairchild House. Housekeeper, hostess, accountant, chief cook and bottle washer. That doesn't leave much time for fun and relaxation as you put it."

"You mean you never take a day off? That's ridiculous." He lay his spoon aside and studied her with embarrassing intentness.

"It's not ridiculous if there's no help for it."

"Hire some help."

"I can't afford it," she snapped.

"You can't afford to hole up in that house and never come out, either," he flared back. When he saw her stricken expression, he lowered his voice. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business, of course, it's just that I can't understand why a beautiful

woman like you would hide herself from the rest of the human race." He tapped his spoon on the tabletop and wouldn't look at her when he asked quietly, "Don't you ever go out with men?"

"Rarely."

"Has there ever been a man?"

"Yes," she said softly. Why keep the poor man in suspense? He was apparently dying to know all the gory details of her life. "We worked for the same company in L.A. He was a minor executive in charge of sales. He was very much a salesman, with impeccable taste in clothes, perfect manners, the gift of gab, and lots of shiny white teeth."

She took a drink of ice water. "I had just graduated from UCLA, had just moved into my own apartment, was feeling independent and dedicated to succeeding in my career. I think he must have originally considered me a challenge, me with my dour determination. He made me laugh, relax, have a good time. In turn, I was good for him. I had new insight into what the public wanted. I listened and made suggestions when he was troubled about a particular product. In all modesty I think my ideas proved workable."

"No doubt."

"After a while, he"—she paused to wet her lips—"he had more of his things in my apartment than in his. I saw no reason not to share an apartment since we planned to marry."

Although Jason had been a frequent and fervent lover, Sloan had always felt she was missing something. Every time they made love, he would want to know how he'd been, if his performance was up to par. She had smiled and said yes, but apparently her qualified answers weren't enough for his ego and he became more and more impatient for her to give him a rave review. But Sloan couldn't lie and say the sky opened up and heaven fell each time, because it hadn't. Never had.

Never did. She knew there must be something desperately wrong with her.

So Jason had moved out. She had been devastated. Not so much by the loss of Jason, but by the defeat she was knowing all over again. Why was it so hard for people to love her? Her parents? Jason?

"What happened?"

She jumped slightly when Carter roused her out of her musings. "One day he just left, taking everything with him. He'd found someone better."

"I doubt that," he said tersely. When Sloan quickly looked at him, she was surprised to see that his bared teeth were clenched angrily. "Are you still . . . still . . ."

Soundlessly she laughed and shook her head. "In love with him? No. It would never have worked. He'd have discovered someone more exciting—"

"Why in the hell do you persist in saying things like that? You're gorgeous! Your figure is luscious, though your wardrobe could stand some help. You try to hide that delectable body with frumpy clothes. That's what's wrong with you. You try to hide from yourself and everyone else. Why?"

Pale and feeling abused by his verbal onslaught, she stared at him wordlessly. When he realized the wounding effect his attack had had on her, his tense posture relaxed and he fell back against the wrought iron chair. A blistering expletive sloughed through his lips. After what seemed like a long while, he said softly, "You can kick me in the shins if you want to. That was out of line."

Sloan stood to break the spell between them. "I think we'd better go."

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Back at Fairchild House, Sloan avoided Carter for the rest of the afternoon as she prepared the evening dinner. The crab casserole turned out to be delicious, but she hardly tasted it, her thoughts centered on

the enigmatic man across from her. After dinner, she cleared the table, then fled directly to her room, not wanting to risk an encounter with Carter.

She was down to her slip when she heard the faint tap on her door.

"Yes? Who is it?" It was superfluous to ask. She knew who it was.

"Me."

"Go away, Carter."

"I have to talk to you."

"You can't come in my room!" she cried softly. "Please go away before someone sees or hears you."

"Then meet me in the parlor." He paused before adding. "I'll come back if you're not there in five minutes."

It took her that long to stop shaking. She knew it was foolhardy to respond to his summons, but she was more than a little afraid that he'd carry out his threat if she didn't. Tightly belting the same dowdy robe she'd had on the night before and slipping into a pair of scuffs, she cautiously opened her door and moved silently through the darkened house toward the parlor. As soon as she entered the room, Carter stepped out of the shadows, walked her backward, and pinned her against the wall with his body.

"Sloan, Sloan," he groaned into her hair, nuzzling it with his mouth and nose.

"No, Carter." The firelight had just enough remnant life to dance on his hair, burnishing the deep russet strands to copper. She longed to plow through the mass and hold his head fast against her neck where his face had burrowed.

She forfeited her chance. His head came up suddenly, fiercely, and it was his hands that threaded through her hair, holding her head still as he peered into the swirling pools of her eyes.

"I've been good all day. I've done not one damn thing I have to be ashamed of. I've sat at that bitch of a typewriter all afternoon trying to come up with a sentence

that has a subject and verb and makes some kind of sense, and I'll be damned if I could. I've not had one idea that didn't involve you—"

"No—"

"Yes!" he said on a hissing whisper. "I've thought of nothing but you since you opened the door last night. I've done nothing but imagine having you beneath me, loving me."

"Stop," she begged. "Don't say anymore. Please. For everyone's sake. Carter, think. Think of Alicia and David and Adam. They're depending on your love. They need you."

"And I need you," he said, crushing her against him and placing his mouth against her ear where he repeated, "I need you."

Her teeth drew blood when they sank into her bottom lip. Tears eked out from underneath eyes squeezed shut. How she overcame the need to surrender to what they both wanted, she didn't know, but somehow she willed herself to push away from him. "You can't have me," she said on heaving breaths, still keeping him at a distance with stiff arms. "You know that. I know it. So please don't do this to me again."

Then she was fleeing down the hallway to the sterile, frigid safety of her room.

---

Carter took his meals with the others in the dining room. Otherwise she didn't see him for the next few days.

Sloan put on a good act, never giving her other guests a hint of the tension and turmoil inside. But every night when she went to her room, she would curl into a tight ball beneath her covers and try to still the fluttering demands of her body. Every inch of flesh seemed to scream for Carter's touch.

She couldn't forget how inescapably he'd held her, yet how gentle his hands were. His breath had been hot and urgent on her skin when he'd whispered, "I need

you," in her ear. Speaking it aloud had been unnecessary. She could feel his need, hard and insistent, against her supple, receptive body.

She went through her days mechanically, preparing the meals with no less competence, but perhaps a little less pleasure. It was with that kind of automation that she was clearing the kitchen late one night a week after the scene in the parlor. All the guests had gone upstairs long ago, so she turned in startled reaction when she heard the noise behind her.

Carter was standing just within the door. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I . . . I thought you were upstairs."

"I was. I have a blasted headache and don't have anything to take for it. I wondered if you might have an aspirin. Something?"

"Yes, yes, of course." She despised the flustered, rushed, breathless sound of her voice. Why couldn't she sound cool, but concerned, and get him the damn aspirin without going to jelly in the process? "In my bathroom."

She was back in less than a minute bearing several bottles of over-the-counter analgesics. "You must get a helluva lot of headaches." The eyebrow she adored arched in humor.

"I didn't know which you'd prefer. Some upset the stomach." God, she sounded like one of those ninnies on the commercials.

"This ought to do." He selected a bottle of plain aspirin and shook two out in his hand.

"I hope it works on your headache."

"Aren't you up late?"

"I made a gelatin mold. I had to chop up a lot of . . . stuff."

"Sloan." He took her shoulders beneath his hands. "We've got a serious problem going on here."

"Serious problem?" Her voice was high and airy.

"Yes."

"With your room? Your headache? The—"

"You don't know what our problem is?"

The low, velvety voice stroked the inside of her thighs and made them warm.

Tears clouded her eyes. Her lips began to tremble. She shook her head in remorse. "No."

"Yes, you do," he countered. Then his lips closed firm and warm over hers.

Her only resistance was a momentary tension in her muscles when his arms went around her and anchored her against him. A small cry of astonishment was trapped by his lips as they opened over hers. They were fanatical in their lust to possess, acting solely out of hunger, carnal and beyond control.

Stunned, Sloan gripped his biceps for balance. As his hands scoured her back, she felt the wonder of his hard muscles bunching and stretching. The feel of them moving with sleek precision in her palms was marvelous and she softly moaned her approval.

"Sloan." Her name became his love-chant as he pressed her face into the warm hollow of his neck. His arms enfolded her as securely and warmly as a fur lined cape. He adjusted his body to hers, instructing her with stroking hands how to mold herself to him in a perfect, breathtaking fit. He held her there for a seemingly endless time, while their hearts pulsed together and chronicled their mounting passion.

Then he lifted her face to his and captured her lips with tethered violence. Their heads rolled from side to side, twisting their lips together, bumping their noses, seeking an outlet for the energy that zephyred through them. Suddenly he was impatient with the fury of it and fused his mouth with hers to still them. A bold thrust of his tongue broke the barrier of her lips and teeth.

A deep growl rumbled in his chest as he

swept her mouth with a marauding tongue intent on conquest. He plundered her sweetly, delving deeply into the farthest recess of the honeyed cove, taking up every part of it and making it his. He stroked her mouth, rapidly, slowly, mercilessly, persuasively. The tip of his tongue rubbed against hers in a challenge to join the skirmish. To his delight she did.

Her tongue darted out to bathe his lips with the taste of her. He caught her lower lip between his teeth in a gentle bite. She sipped at his lips, flirtatiously and elusively, until his tongue sank once again into the luscious temptation of her mouth. He made love to it. First with light quick thrusts, then with stronger, slower, deeper ones.

Sloan lost all track of time, of space and distance, of right and wrong. She had wanted this. From the instant she saw him standing on the doorstep, she had wanted his lips on hers, his hands moving over her body as they were now with an audacious curiosity that wouldn't be denied. His whispered love words and moans of gratification were the music she had wanted to hear falling on her ears. It was torture to pull away from him, but Sloan made herself do it once again.

"Carter, don't. We can't."

He withdrew with a sigh. "Every time I've come near you, I've behaved like a sex maniac. I didn't plan on anything happening when I came downstairs tonight. I didn't contrive a headache just to catch you alone. I swear to God I didn't."

"You didn't force me to do anything."

He smiled and let his eyes range over her face and mussed hair. "I'm a man, Sloan. I've been turned down, as any guy honest enough to admit it has. But I've also had more than my share of women all over the world. I've taken them heartlessly and quickly for my own satisfaction. Rarely did I care if I ever saw them again." He gripped her hand tight.

"That's not what it is this time. This is not only lust. Believe that. I don't want you to think that I consider you a convenient body that's good for a few rolls in the hay while I'm under your roof as if you went with the rent."

She blushed and glanced away. "I didn't think that."

"I've had a helluva time writing this past week," he admitted. "I've been writing about something for years when I didn't know a damn thing about it. And the worst of it is, I didn't even know I didn't know."

He went to stand at the sink, staring at the rain that dripped monotonously from the eaves. "In each of my books I had a love interest, sometimes a triangle, but always some form of romance. I convinced myself and tried to convince my readers that my hero was always in love with the girl. Now I know I was writing *at* love without ever having known what it felt like."

He turned back to her. "Now that I know, now that I've met you, I'm dissatisfied with everything I've written because it doesn't convey the total absorption a man has with a woman when he loves her. I want to express that sense of helplessness with this book. My hero Gregory really loves the heroine, Lisa and it's going to kill him to have to . . . to . . ."

"To leave her," she finished numbly.

"I'm not going to think about that," Carter said angrily.

"We have to, Carter. You're engaged to my best friend, the only person in the world who has ever cared about me. We love each other as friends. I came so close tonight to betraying that friendship and I can't risk it again. She's my friend."

"Dammit, she's my friend too," he shouted. "And that's the way I love her, Sloan."

She covered her ears. "No. You shouldn't tell me this."

He strode toward her and removed her hands.

"Maybe not, but you're going to hear it. I think Alicia's a great lady, a little flighty and irresponsible, but charmingly so. She was Jim's wife and she made my best friend happy. That was reason enough to love her. But I asked her to marry me because it was convenient to both of us, Sloan. She and the boys need a keeper. I felt duty bound to Jim to take care of them. The time has come in my life when I should have a wife and children. That's the only reason I asked her to marry me. I know she's still in love with Jim and I've never entertained any romantic notions about her."

She pulled free of his restraining hands.

"Once you get back to Alicia and the boys—"

"That's crap, Sloan. Don't you think I'm man enough to know what I want? I could have found you in a supermarket as you bumped into my cart or in an elevator or anywhere and I'd have known you with the same familiarity as I did the other night when you opened your door to me."

"Alicia will be a wonderful wife," she said desperately, twisting her hands. She loved the words pouring out of his mouth, but knew she shouldn't be listening to them, much less cherishing each one.

"No doubt she will, but will she be wonderful for me? She doesn't respect my need for solitude when I'm working. If she were here, she'd be running up those stairs knocking on the door every ten minutes—"

"Stop!"

"No. You listen," He gripped her shoulders and shook her slightly until her head wobbled back and she was forced to heed his words. "Would I be good for her? I suffer every writer's paranoia, Sloan. I need to talk. To converse. Often. And to someone who will listen. I mean really listen. You do."

"Damn you, Carter!" She yanked herself free and backed away from him. "Don't you dare stand there and criticize the woman you're going to marry to me. That's what men do when they pick up a woman in a bar, gain her sympathy so she'll have sex with them. 'My wife doesn't understand me.' Brilliant as you are, can't you come up with something more original than that? I don't want to hear it. It makes me feel dirty. If you and Alicia have problems that need ironing out, then iron them out privately. I don't want to know about them or be involved in them."

"Well that's too damn bad because you are involved, Sloan." He drew her to him again and, though she struggled, he wouldn't release her. "From the top of your beautiful head to the tips of your ten toes and at all points in between, you're involved." He sealed her mouth to his with a sweet kiss.

He was so wrapped up in it, that he blinked stupidly and incredulously when she pushed him away. "Don't say things like that to me." Her face was a hard cold mask that if she didn't guard carefully would crumble. "Don't approach me like this again or I'll have to ask you to leave Fairchild House."

Then she turned on her heel and left him.

---

The next day newspapers were filled with stories about the unusual amount of rain the Bay Area was having and the consequences of it.

Sloan hadn't really been concentrating on the inclement weather. Her mind had been too occupied elsewhere. So she was mildly surprised to read about the mudslides reported in the hills surrounding the city and the local flooding in lower areas. The conditions became disastrous enough to make television network news for the next several days.

Keeping a wary eye on the weather, Sloan was dismayed to watch the situation worsen. The Golden Gate Bridge was closed to traffic for hours at a time because high winds and torrential rains made driving across it perilous.

Sloan began to panic. Her current guests were leaving the next day. She had two rooms reserved for the weekend, but she was afraid tourists would hear the discouraging weather reports, which the news reporters seemed bent on painting as black as possible, and cancel their trips. Not only would that severely affect her budget, but it would also mean she and Carter would be alone. Unless she could convince him to leave—and she thought the possibilities of that were about as good as those of the rain stopping any time soon.

Her worst fears came to fruition. Within an hour she got cancellation calls from both her weekend reservations. Despondently she sat at her desk in the cramped office under the stairs and ran tape after tape through the adding machine, praying the earlier tabulations would prove to be in error. How was she going to pay this month's bills? At least worrying over money kept her from worrying over Carter. By tomorrow night, they would be in the house alone.

It was with certain dread that she picked up the telephone when it rang later that day. "Fairchild House," she said with the resignation of one who knows it must be a creditor calling.

"You sound as dismal as the weather there is supposed to be."

"Alicia?" Her heart flopped over in her chest, but she swore to herself it wasn't out of guilt. "How are you?"

"Fine. The boys are fine. Nothing's wrong, I just wanted to call."

"I'll go get Carter. He's working as usual."

"Actually, Sloan, I wanted to talk to

you," Alicia said quietly. "How does Carter seem to you?"

Sloan licked suddenly parched lips. "Seem?" She was twisting the telephone cord with rubbery fingers. "What do you mean?"

"He sounds funny when I talk to him. Distracted. Distant. I know he's working and he's always preoccupied, in another world, you know, when he's into a book, but I can't help but feel a little hurt by his lack of attention."

"I'm sure you're justified in feeling that way, Alicia," Sloan said slowly. "Naturally you're wrapped up in wedding plans, but I think women put more stock in things like that than men do."

"I was thinking I might come up there tomorrow night and spend the weekend with the two of you."

"Come up here? Tomorrow? That would be wonderful!" She meant it. Alicia's presence would set things right.

"Mother's offered to keep the boys. Do you have an extra bed?"

"Too many I'm afraid," Sloan said with a bitter laugh. "Please come."

"I've heard the weather is deplorable."

"So? We'll sit by the fire and visit while Carter's working."

"I'm hoping I can get him to take the weekend off."

"Let me go get Carter. I'm sure—"

"No. You can tell him I'm coming. If I'm going to disrupt his whole weekend, I'll leave him in peace today."

---

"I think that's selfish of you, Carter," Alicia was saying the next evening. "What difference does it make?"

"No one reads my manuscript before I'm finished. Completely finished. Not my agent, not my editor, not my . . . fiancée. No one."

Alicia had arrived several hours earlier and now they were in the dining room eating the meal Sloan had spent most of the

day preparing. The food was delicious, the ambiance of the turn-of-the-century dining room warm and cozy, especially with the incessant rain that ran in silver rivulets down the paned windows.

"Do you understand why he won't at least let me thumb through his manuscript, Sloan?"

Sloan desperately wished Alicia wouldn't ask her opinion on anything concerning Carter. She toyed with the food remaining on her plate with an idle fork. "Yes, I think I can. He wants to make it as perfect as he knows how, and if he doesn't feel it's perfect yet, he's cheating both you and himself if he lets you read it prematurely."

Alicia looked at her as though she were speaking a foreign language. "I guess so. But for heaven's sake, I'm going to be his wife."

Carter, too, was looking at Sloan, and she hoped the light burning in his eyes was only a reflection of the candles on the table. "I'm sorry, Alicia. But I remain steadfast. No one reads the book till I'm done."

"How much do you lack? Can you finish it earlier than you originally thought?"

He shifted uneasily in his chair and took a sip of wine. "I don't think so. I'm not happy with the last chapter."

"It's probably wonderful," Alicia said admiringly and reached across the table to cover his hand.

Envy stabbed through Sloan's vital organs. Alicia had the right to touch his hand. She had the right to brush back the unruly hair that had fallen onto his forehead, the right to trace the mismatched arches of his eyebrows, and to iron out with loving fingertips the worried crease between them. Did Alicia even see that flagrant sign of anxiety?

Sloan stood. "You and Carter relax and make yourselves at home. I'll get started on the dishes."



"No, no, let me help," Alicia said.

"Go," Sloan said, pointing an imperious finger toward the parlor. "This is your mini-vacation. I'm sure you'd rather be alone with Carter tonight. Please turn off the lights when you go upstairs. I'll see you both in the morning."

She fled the room, knowing it was rude, knowing she was a coward, and knowing that if she had stayed and watched them together another moment she would have died.

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She hated herself for doing it. She stared at the door to Alicia's room and knew that if she opened it and found that Alicia's bed hadn't been slept in, she'd never forgive herself for being compelled to find out. But nothing on earth could keep her from seeing for herself where Alicia had spent the night. The brass knob turned under her hand and the door swung open and she saw the bed with its flung back spread and wrinkled sheets and dented pillow. One pillow.

Sloan weakly slumped against the door-jamb and immediately despised herself for this snooping. But she had had to know. She could excuse it as part of her job to go into a guest's bedroom to make the bed. Deep down, she knew she was spying on her best friend.

Last night she'd heard them as they went upstairs, but she hadn't been able to tell if they'd gone into the same room or not. It had been a hellish night. She'd tossed and turned in her bed, imagining Alicia's beautiful naked body being explored by Carter's hands and lips. It had been all she could do to keep from screaming out her emotional agony.

They had come down to breakfast together, Alicia happy and vivacious and gorgeous, Carter rumped and haggard and surly, as though he hadn't slept much.

"But at least he slept in his own room," Sloan said to herself as she quickly made

Alicia's bed.

After the hearty breakfast Sloan had fed them, Alicia had insisted that Carter take her shopping. Despite her pleas, Sloan had declined to go with them, saying she had bookkeeping to do. She did, but it was nothing that couldn't be postponed or done in half an hour. Still, she couldn't punish herself by tagging along with them like a maiden aunt.

She was relieved when they returned very late in the afternoon and said they wanted to go out for dinner. Of course they expected her to go with them, but she refused. Alicia pleaded. Carter was stonily silent after politely seconding Alicia's invitation. Sloan remained resolute, and finally Alicia gave up.

Alicia wore a new dress and Carter looked handsome and successful in his sport coat and tie. The perfect couple. The embodiment of the American dream.

Sloan, smiling and commissioning them to have a good time, watched as they climbed into a cab. She closed the door to Fairchild House and pressed her head into the hard coldness of the door, wishing she had no more feeling than it.

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"I think I'll go back to Los Angeles with you," Carter said quietly.

Sloan hadn't heard them last night when they had come in. She was glad. She didn't want to know if they'd shared the same room during the night.

Alicia had insisted on helping with the brunch dishes and now they were lazing away the hours of early afternoon with cups of coffee in front of the fire in the parlor.

"No," Alicia grumbled. "You can't come back. Not now."

Sloan glanced at Carter but when she saw that his own surprise mirrored hers, she quickly averted her eyes back to Alicia's sullen face.

"Why shouldn't I go back home? I

thought you'd want me to."

"I do, Carter," Alicia said earnestly. "But you haven't finished your book and you couldn't get it done before the wedding even if you locked yourself in your house. We'd all start hounding you just as we did before."

He shrugged. "I just won't finish it until after the wedding. It's not crucial that I meet my deadline. I can get an extension."

"I'm not starting off a marriage with something as important as a literary masterpiece between us. You'd never forgive me for that."

"It's hardly a literary masterpiece. There would be nothing to forgive."

She looked at him with open skepticism. "I know you, Carter Madison. If your book isn't going well, you're miserable and I don't want a sad sack for a groom. You tell him, Sloan. He should stay here in Fairchild House until he's finished. Right?"

Sloan's eyes bounced from Alicia to Carter. He was carefully listening for her answer. It was much safer to look at Alicia. "I'm sure Carter will do what he feels he should without any advice from me."

"You really should go ahead and finish it, darling. You won't be happy until you do, will you?"

His eyes made a swift trip in Sloan's direction and back. "No," he admitted.

"And this is the best place for you to work right now. So you'll stay, though I truly appreciate your making the unselfish gesture." Alicia leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his mouth. He touched her shoulder briefly. "Now I've got to get my things together. My cab will be here in less than an hour."

Sloan watched the cab pull away, Alicia waving enthusiastically from the back seat. The car was soon swallowed by the gloom and the rain. Carter preceded Sloan into the house and went into the parlor. He

was standing in front of the fireplace gazing into the flames when he said, "I tried."

She had been making a hasty retreat toward her own quarters when his words stopped her.

"What did you say?"

He turned around, a dark, slender silhouette against the firelight. He hadn't turned on any lamps. The room and hall were dark save for the reddish glow. "I said I tried. To gracefully leave," he added when she still seemed not to comprehend.

"Yes, well . . . It would have been best. I think this is the first time in her life Alicia made a decision with her head instead of her heart." She said it with derisive affection and he caught the humor. It served to lessen the tension somewhat.

He chuckled softly. "Her timing is off." He studied the carpet beneath his feet. "She's a trusting soul. She doesn't suspect a thing. She didn't even mention that we'd be here alone without any customers for chaperones."

Sloan looked away and crossed her arms in front of her. She was suddenly very cold. "She has no reason to mistrust either of us."

He sighed heavily. "No. I guess not." She grew warm again when he stopped pretending interest in the rug and raised his eyes to her. They shone on her from across the dim room. "Will you do me a favor, Sloan? As a friend?"

She lifted her eyes to his.

"Would you read my manuscript?"

"But you said no one ever reads a manuscript of yours before it's finished."

"No one does. This is an exception. I want you to read *Sleeping Mistress* and tell me what you think of it . . . honestly."

"I didn't know you were finished with it."

"I'm working on the last chapter now, and I'll feed it to you as we go."

After a moment of introspection she said slowly, "Alicia will be upset."

"She'll never know. At least I don't intend to tell her you've read it."

"But Alicia should be the one who reads the manuscript for you."

"She would love it, or rather she'd tell me she loved it whether she did or not. And that's not to be taken as a criticism of her. It's a truthful observation. She'd be kind at the risk of offending me."

"How do you know I wouldn't do that? Tell you what you want to hear instead of what I really think."

"You've never minced words with me before, nor shied away from saying things I didn't particularly want to hear. Even at the risk of making me furious. I don't imagine you'd start now." He saw the pros and cons parading across her face in stark disclosure of her indecision. "It won't take up too much of your time, will it? You could do it in the evenings."

She laughed then. "I don't suppose I'll be busy this week. You're my only boarder now."

"Speaking of that, please don't go through that servile hostess routine just for me, okay? Let me treat you to some meals out." When he saw she was about to object he stopped her with raised palms. "I insist. It can be your payment for reading the manuscript."

"But your breakfast and dinner are included in the price of the room."

"Then we'll consider it a swap off."

"Your meals are worth more than that," she argued.

"God, you're proud and stubborn. Okay, let's say you can fix my breakfast and serve it in the kitchen, and we'll either go out or have sandwiches or something easily prepared for dinner. Deal?"

He stuck his hand out for her to shake. She took it and pumped it twice firmly. "Deal."

"Sealed with a handshake and"—he leaned down toward her—"a kiss."

His lips met hers softly, but firmly, in

what was supposed to be a dispassionate kiss. Instead the contact of his mouth on hers sent an arrow of love shooting into her body.

When he pulled away, his eyes were misty with longing. "When do you want to start?" he asked thickly.

"Tonight."

He smiled, realizing that all her objections had been for show. His heart swelled with pride over how eager she was to read his manuscript.

Sloan's own heart was exultant. He was granting her a privilege no one else had ever had, nor ever would. It wasn't his body, or his name, or even his love. It was his life's work he was giving her. And she knew that above all else, that was most precious to him.

---

Their days together began to fall into a natural rhythm. They shared breakfast in the kitchen, then Carter went back upstairs to his typewriter and Sloan read the manuscript. She quickly became totally engrossed in the story and in the characters Carter had so admirably created.

On Friday Carter declared at mid-afternoon when he came down for a cup of coffee that he was taking her out to dinner.

The rest of the day she worked on herself, doing her nails, her hair, taking a long soaking bath in oil-slicked water, pressing her best dress. It was a soft, clinging wool jersey in a subdued shade of blue that deepened the mysterious hue of her eyes.

Carter couldn't help but notice that now, as he watched her from across the candlelit table. He had selected one of the restaurants at Pier 39 that overlooked part of the marina.

"Carter, have you ever been married?" Sloan asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

"No, I've never been married. I came close once."

"What happened?" A sudden rush of

color painted two bright patches on her cheeks. "You don't have to tell me," she added hastily. "I can't imagine why I asked."

He took her hand and squeezed it playfully. "You wanted to know. There's no heartbreaking secret as to why I'm still single. She was a bright, beautiful young lady, a decorator with a growing list of impressive clients. She wanted me to use my architecture degree and start making tubs of money so we could play hard and live fast. I wanted to write even if it meant not making any money and not playing so hard and living quite so fast. In short, we wanted different things, had irreconcilable goals, and we parted amiably."

"Where is she now?"

"Married to a bright and beautiful surgeon and living as she wanted to."

"But I'll bet her bright and beautiful surgeon doesn't make the money you do."

He assumed a disbelieving look and his eyebrow shot up. "Why, Ms. Fairchild, I'm flabbergasted. Could it be that you have a malicious streak to your otherwise flawless nature?"

They laughed and declined the waiter's offer for more coffee. As they crossed the footbridge over Embarcadero to the parking lot, she said. "I didn't know you had an interest in architecture."

"I studied it for five long, tedious years to please a father who thought wanting to be a writer was an unambitious copout."

"What does he think now?"

"Now he displays my books on the mantel like trophies. He and Mother live in Palm Springs. He's a retired banker."

"Do you love them?"

"Yes. Because they gave me life and because they did the best they knew how to do at parenting an only child. I see their shortcomings and was frustrated and mad as hell when they laughed at my dreams. Now I take a little credit for myself for what I've become and try not to blame

them for all that I'm not."

She cocked her head to one side. "Is there a lecture in there somewhere?"

The corner of his mouth tilted into a smile. "You're not only beautiful, you're perceptive." His expression changed as he framed her face between his hands and said seriously, "Alicia's told me about your family. Just because your parents weren't capable of showering you with affection doesn't mean you're not worth loving, Sloan. It wasn't a failure on your part, but on theirs. They cheated themselves of your love. Don't cheat yourself."

Tears glistened on her eyelashes and there was a distinct tremor to the lips that whispered, "Thank you." Coming up on her toes, she kissed his hard cheek.

His eyes were like torches burning in the gloomy night as he said tightly, "You're welcome."

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Tears blurred the last few lines of typed text, but Sloan read each poignant word. She lowered the sheet of paper to her lap, then on impulse, flattened it against her breasts.

They had returned home from their dinner out. Carter had bade her a regretful good night and gone upstairs. The remaining chapters of the manuscript lay so temptingly in their box that after Sloan had changed into her velour robe, she took it with her into the parlor. Stoking up the fire that had been banked before they left for dinner, and wrapping herself in a blanket for extra warmth, she got comfortable in one of the roomier chairs. Only one small lamp burned on the table at her elbow, but the whole room faded into oblivion as she stepped into the final scenes of Carter's book as though they were three-dimensional.

His characters breathed. Sloan was wildly in love with the hero, Gregory, even as much as Lisa, the heroine, was.

Indeed, the closer to the end of the book she got, the closer Lisa resembled Sloan in how she thought and how she reacted to life.

Carter had somehow captured her ambiguity, her emotions, her physical cognizance of him, as keenly as if she'd quoted it to him verbatim. How could he know her so well? Secret thoughts she'd harbored were vividly revealed in Lisa's thought processes. Yet such blatant intrusion into her innermost self didn't feel like a violation. It felt like freedom.

Her eyes sought him as though beckoned to do so. He was standing in the shadows near the doorway, barefoot and shirtless. He was still wearing the dress slacks he'd worn to dinner. His expression was indiscernible in the darkness.

Carter knew he'd never seen a more beautiful sight. She looked like a child folded in the chair with the blanket swathing her. Her feet were tucked under her. Her posture may have been innocent, but her rapt expression was that of a woman.

His heart jumped to his throat as he noted that her hands were pressing the last page he'd written to her breasts. He'd been unable to go any farther, but he'd worked on that damn passage for one whole day, trying to get it right, trying to capture Lisa's feelings on paper. Did Sloan recognize herself?

And then he was moving toward her even before he heard her whispered plea.

"Carter, love me."

"Gladly, my love, gladly," he said.

"Should we go upstairs?" he asked much later into her hair. They lay face to face, her head cradled against his chest. Lazily his fingers were twining through her hair.

"No," she said, rubbing her face back and forth over the hair-matted wall of his chest. "Not just yet. This is too good."

It feels so good."

"Does it?" With an index finger under her chin he lifted her face for a gentle kiss.

"That was a terribly brazen thing I did. Asking you to make love to me."

At the time she hadn't thought about having the courage to woo him, or the right or wrong of it. She had simply obeyed her instinct and he had heeded his own. Neither regretted it. Of that she was certain.

It was wrong. Alicia had been betrayed and everything Sloan had stood for had been compromised. But she wasn't sorry for it. Alicia would have Carter for the rest of his life. Tonight, for a few brief hours, he belonged to Sloan. The consequences could be lamented later. The only worry that plagued her now was if she had disappointed him.

"I know I'm awkward." Her hand was self-consciously restless as it tweaked the hair on his chest.

"Sloan." He repeated her name until she met his eyes in the flickering firelight. "I am content. More content than I've ever been with a woman. You are what I need, more than I could ever hope for. Please don't insult me by belittling yourself. I love you, Sloan."

"I love you, too," she vowed as tears pooled in her eyes, mirroring the nearby flames. "I love you so much it hurts."

The days passed far too quickly and they tried not to mark the limited hours allowed them. They lived vagariously according to their appetites, their moods, their libidos. Carter had the lecherous idea of enshrining every bedroom in the house in a most appropriate way. Sloan refused, reminding him of all the linens she would have to wash and iron.

The rain, which had been everyone else's nemesis and their blessing, abated. The sun, after a few days of maidenly coyness, bared herself to the pale San Francis-

cans.

Sloan rebooked three rooms that had been previously canceled. The guests were due to arrive the following week. She made more reservations for coming months and thought that with just a little luck, she might recoup the losses the unnaturally disagreeable weather had cost her.

"Hey, what do you know? A bookstore!" Carter chortled. They had gone out to replenish her pantry and soak up some sunshine. After storing her packages, in the car, they had decided to walk and window shop for the sake of needed exercise. Carter now caught her arm and dragged her toward the door of the old house near Washington Square that had been quaintly converted into a two-level bookstore.

The bell over the door tinkled pleasantly as they went in. The musty proprietor peered at them over the top of his half-glasses and nodded a greeting with his bald head, then went back to his book.

"He didn't recognize you," Sloan whispered as Carter led her toward the racks of fiction.

"They usually don't. I don't mind as long as they sell my books."

"But the fame and fortune make you uneasy sometimes, don't they?" Her intuition was founded on love.

His eyes sought hers and held them. "A bit, yes."

"Why, Carter?"

He sighed and leaned against the shelf, taking her hand and studying it as he answered slowly. "I don't know. Sometimes I feel like a well-paid whore."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it? My writing is technically correct, my style is my own, not a bastardization of someone else's, I do what I do well, I bring pleasure. But sometimes I feel like what I've done isn't very important. I'd like to do a truly meaningful novel whether it was a commercial success or not."

"Why don't you then?"

His eyes whipped up from her hand to her face. It was as though no one had ever challenged him to it before. "Do you think I could?"

"I know you could. You've got the talent. Your writing is superb. Just direct it in the channel you want it to go. Please yourself with the book you want to write."

He studied her quietly for a long moment, his finger stroking her cheek. She could feel the love emanating from him and seeping into her. "You're something," he mouthed.

"You're something," she responded in kind.

"I love you so much."

"I love you."

He scooted closer. "Do you think our studious proprietor would notice if we slipped into his storeroom and I—"

"Well, well, well, there's a celebrity in our midst."

The man who had intruded on their privacy was slight, several inches shorter than Sloan. His hair was clipped close to his scalp and only brought attention to the narrowness of his head. A sharply pointed goatee gave him a sinister aspect. His eyes were as shifty and busy as a ferret's. A turtleneck sweater was anchored to his chest by ropes of gold chains.

"You're far too humble, Sydney," Carter drawled, edging closer to Sloan in what she sensed was a protective gesture. "You're as much a celebrity as I."

"A celebrity perhaps. Humble? Not at all, Mr. Madison. I consider my opinions to be sterling, as do my readers."

Sloan could feel Carter's muscles bunching with angry tension. "Ms. Sloan Fairchild, Mr. Sydney Gladstone." He made the introduction out of necessity and with as little flair as possible.

"Hello, Mr. Gladstone," she murmured.

"Ms. Fairchild," Gladstone oozed, ex-

ecuting a jerky little bow.

She knew who the man was. His column was run twice a week in the book section of the *Chronicle* and she knew it was syndicated to other major newspapers. She didn't read him. She found his columns to be petty and vindictive, almost always taking pot shots at the writers rather than addressing what they'd written.

"We didn't hear you come in," Carter said.

He laughed, and it was a nasty sound. "Implying that you would have taken your leave sooner if you had. Really, Mr. Madison, are you still piqued by my critique in *Publisher's Weekly* of your last book?"

"I wasn't piqued. Nor am I now. It, like all your articles, was tripe."

The skinny nostrils almost closed in vexation. "Nevertheless I see you took my advice. If you'll recall I said that the love sequences in your novels were predictable and lackluster. I suggested that your readers might benefit from your getting a new love interest of your own." He slanted a crude glance at Sloan. "I see by the way you could barely keep your hands from under your mistress's sweater that you've taken my advice."

"You sonofabitch," Carter was at his throat in one lunge. The man was slammed into the bookshelf with his Adam's apple the victim of Carter's steely fingers.

"What's the trouble back there?"

The proprietor had finally been roused from his book.

"No trouble," Carter called back. Only then did he release the sagging, choking critic from his deathgrip. Then he gently took Sloan's arm and led her from the store.

How her knees supported her until they reached the car, she never knew. Carter ushered her into the passenger side with tender courtesy. "God I'm sorry, Sloan," he said when he got in.

"It wasn't your fault."

"No, but it was my grudge match. I called him a pompous, no-talent ass on the *Tonight Show* once and he can't quite find it in himself to forgive me."

His attempt at humor failed miserably. She continued to stare out the windshield in a daze. The white stillness of her face caused alarm to worm through his entrails, but there was nothing he could do about it parked in a car on a public street. He crammed the car into first gear, lurched into traffic and made record time getting them to Fairchild House. Wordlessly he helped her carry in her packages and deposited them on the kitchen table.

He reached for her. "Sloan—"

"No!"

He was stunned as she dodged his embrace.

"You can't let some small-minded jerk like that bother you, Sloan. You're more intelligent than that."

"It wasn't him, it's . . . me. What he said woke me up to the fact that I'll never be anything to you but a mistress. Oh, God. I hate that word."

"So do I. Don't ever say it again in relation to yourself."

"Why not?" she flared. "That's what I've been to you, isn't it? Not your wife. Certainly more than a friend. What would you call me?"

"Beloved," he said in a voice striving for calmness. "The woman I love."

"But not the woman you'll marry. Not the woman you'll give your name to. Not the woman you'll share your life, have your children."

"You knew that, Sloan. We both did. And we both know that there wasn't one damn thing we could do about it. You said you'd love me while you could."

"I know," she sobbed, wringing her hands. "I thought it would be enough. It's not. I've betrayed my best friend with you. Betrayed myself. I couldn't abide



having that hideous man looking at me that way, saying those things. He and everyone else will see our love as something sleazy. What's between us may be pure, but the rest of the world won't see it that way."

"Screw the rest of the world!" he shouted. "Who the hell is going to know?"

"But it's not honest, Carter. Our love is based on deceit." She paused to draw in several deep breaths, garnering her strength and courage to do what she had to do. "You've got to leave, Carter. You can't stay here any longer."

"Dammit, Sloan, you can't mean that."

"Oh, but I do," she said with indisputable resolution.

His eyes beamed into hers incisively. "You're actually going to crawl behind that goddamn shell again, aren't you? Put yourself behind that protective shield of yours that's as tough as armor and just as impenetrable."

"Analysis isn't your forte, Mr. Madison. Stick to nouns and verbs and crude language and vulgar innuendoes. You're very good at them."

"Beggings isn't my forte either." He went to the kitchen door and pushed it open. "All right, Sloan, go back to your safe, lonely world and wallow in your selflessness. And when you try to sleep alone at night, count up all the rewards you have from it."

She watched him almost tear the door off its hinges as he pushed through it. She watched, too, as it swung back and forth until it came to a standstill, just as surely as her heart had stopped.

---

"Fairchild House," Sloan said into the telephone two days later.

"Sloan."

The voice was so familiar yet so unlike itself. "Alicia? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said dully. "At least not an emergency; I didn't mean to frighten

you."

"Y-you don't sound like yourself."

"For a very good reason."

Sloan mashed her fingers to colorless lips. She couldn't know! She couldn't have found out!

"Can we talk about it?"

"Oh, Sloan, please, yes. I've got to talk to somebody," Alicia collapsed into tears.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously. "Alicia, please don't cry like that. Tell me."

"I can't. I want to, but . . . I've got to talk to somebody," she repeated.

Sloan bit her lower lip before saying. "Carter. Why don't you talk to him?"

"Carter's not here."

"Not there?"

"Didn't he tell you where he was going when he left Fairchild House? He didn't come to Los Angeles. He telephoned me from the airport saying he was going to New York to deliver his manuscript in person. He said he couldn't wait to unload it and that he wanted to get all the business taken care of before the wedding."

Clearing her throat, Sloan said, "No, he just left one evening. He didn't say where he was going and I assumed he was going home."

"I assumed he would too, the minute he finished his book, but it's just as well under the circumstances that he didn't."

"What circumstances?" Sloan asked, getting back to the original reason for Alicia's call.

"Sloan, can you come to Los Angeles?"

Sloan coughed a short laugh. "Of course not. What are you talking about?"

"Please, Sloan. If you've ever loved me as a friend, come down here. Just for a day. I'd come up there, only I've left the boys too much recently. I'll pay for your ticket. I'll do anything, only please come, Sloan. You don't have anyone at Fairchild House now, do you? Please."

Sloan studied the brass paperweight on her desk. The desperation in Alicia's

voice was genuine. Something was terribly wrong and she was reaching out to her best friend for help.

"I have guests coming next Wednesday. I'll have to come before then."

"Tomorrow," Alicia said rapidly. "Tomorrow, please."

Sloan rubbed her aching forehead with agitated fingers. Could she ever face Alicia? "I suppose I could. I'll catch an early plane and take a cab to your house."

"I'll be at Carter's beach house. He asked me to go over and check on things and the kids want to play on the beach."

God, would this torment, this nightmare ever end? Carter's house! "What's the address?" she asked glumly. Refusing Alicia's offer to purchase her ticket, she promised to see her the following day.

Like a sleepwalker, she lived through the rest of the day. That's how she'd moved since Carter's departure. She had lived out of habit, sleeping, waking, eating, working in the house like a programmed robot. What joy Fairchild House had previously brought her had now been altered by Carter's brief residence. Forever that large room in the corner of the second floor would be Carter's room. No amount of cleansers or vacuuming or air fresheners would rid it of him. Just as her heart would never be exorcised of his spirit.

---

Sloan suffered a major setback when she stepped out of the airport taxi and saw his house outlined against a backdrop of sun and sky. It so reflected the nature of the man that her eyes blurred with tears as she paid her fare to the driver.

Hearing the squeals and laughter of children, she walked around the redwood deck that surrounded the house. Alicia was leaning over the back rail calling down to the two boys chasing along the beach. "Adam, stop throwing sand or I'll make you come in."

"You wouldn't be that cruel, would you?"

"Sloan!" Alicia cried and rushed to embrace her friend. She clung to her, hugging her tight, making Sloan choke on her guilt. "God, it's good to see you. I'm so glad you came. Let's go inside."

"The boys—"

"They're forbidden to go near the water. It's too cold. I'll keep an eye on them."

"They're growing so fast," Sloan observed wistfully as she watched the two little bodies running gleefully in the sand.

"Yes, they are."

Alicia slid open a floor-to-ceiling glass door and led Sloan from the deck into Carter's house. Its walls were lined with bookcases. The whole room was washed with sunlight. Sloan loved it. She was certain Carter had designed it.

"I want you to see the boys later, but I want to talk first. Do you mind?" Alicia asked as they both sat down.

"Of course not. What's the matter?"

"God, you don't know how good it is to hear your sound, practical, steadfast voice," Alicia sighed. "Okay. Here goes my confession. I went to Tahoe that weekend after I came to San Francisco. I have a friend who has been divorced for several months and she's been after me to go out of town with her for a weekend. I swear to God, Sloan, I don't know why I went in the first place, except . . . Let's skip the reason for now. I went and I—I met someone. He was a good-looking man, nice, amusing, and we had a great time skiing together all day. And that night I—I stayed in his room and he made love to me all night and it was absolutely terrific."

Alicia seemed vastly relieved that it was out. She shuddered on a long expulsion of breath. "I know you must think I'm a tramp, sleeping with a man I barely knew and liking it so much. How could you begin to understand, Sloan? A level-headed

woman like you would never let herself go like that, throw caution to the wind, let the devil take tomorrow, do something she knew wasn't right."

Sloan's heart was thudding painfully and she felt like she might pass out if the thunder in her head grew any louder. She knew exactly what it was to sacrifice everything for passion's sake!

"I don't know what happened to me." Alicia's voice trailed off and she plucked at a loose thread on her sweater. "Maybe I shouldn't confide this to you, but I've got to get it all off my chest. Carter and I have never, you know, been together. We've never gone beyond mild affection. Every time I look at Carter, I see Jim, and it's like we're cheating on him. I didn't feel that way with the man in Tahoe."

"Carter was Jim's best friend. It's natural that you'd feel that way," Sloan said for lack of anything better.

"In all truthfulness Carter's never . . . turned me on. He's just too good a friend. I guess after we're married I'll do what brides are expected to do. Even though he does nothing for me sexually, I have no doubt about Carter's virility. I doubt he'd tolerate a celibate marriage. We both want another child." Her voice trailed off into nothingness, its faint whisper carried by an uncaring ocean breeze.

Despite her inner turmoil, Alicia looked beautifully shy when she said, "Sloan, every time Mac—that was his name—touched me, I tingled all over. Do you know what I mean? Do you think I'm a terrible person?"

Sloan's soft smile was a trifle sad. "Yes, I know what you mean and no; I don't think you're at all terrible." With an affected nonchalance she asked, "This Mac, where does he live? Would you ever want to see him again?"

"He lives in Portland and he said he wanted to come see me. Of course I refused. I told him everything." She sighed

deeply. "He's not really the point. The point is, I've limited my options." She sat up suddenly. "I suddenly woke up to the fact that Jim might not be the only man I could love wholeheartedly and passionately. I thought that part of me was dead. It isn't. It's just been lying dormant and when Mac touched me, I was reminded that I am a woman, not just a widow and a mother and a close friend."

"What will you do?" Sloan asked slowly.

"I don't know," Alicia anguished. "Tell me what to do, Sloan." Pleading was in Alicia's crystal eyes and in her voice.

"I can't," Sloan cried on a sudden burst of emotion. "Don't ask that of me, Alicia." If only she could. If only she could tell Alicia that it would be best for all concerned if she broke her engagement to Carter. One part of her was screaming, "Tell her, tell her. Make her decision easy for her. She'll be glad that you and Carter have fallen in love. Tell her."

Another part of her was closing its ears to her heart's arguments. She couldn't interfere with Alicia's decision. Maybe Alicia loved Carter more than she realized. That weekend in Tahoe was the first time she'd been on a fling and she was still basking in the novelty of it. Her mind was remembering it more romantically than it had been. Later, she would realize that it was the steady, reliable kind of love that she and Carter shared that she needed.

No. Sloan could say nothing.

Suddenly they heard David's lilting voice carrying across the wind. "Carter, Carter. Carter's back."

Turning simultaneously, they saw Carter just as he rounded the corner. When he saw Alicia's companion, he stopped with an abruptness as sure as if he'd walked into an invisible wall.

Soulfully, Alicia looked into Sloan's eyes. Had she not been so wrapped up in her own misery, she would have seen her

desolation mirrored in their smoky depths. A resigned smile tried to get a foothold on her lips, but didn't quite make it. "I really have no choice, do I?" she whispered for Sloan's ears alone.

Sloan shook her head, knowing that she had no choice but to remain forever silent, even if it killed her. "No."

"I knew that when it came right down to it, I wouldn't do anything else. I'll do what you would do. You'd do the right thing, Sloan. I know you would."

The *right* thing? Was damning three people to unhappiness the right thing to do? Yes. In this circumstance it was. Carter and Alicia would grow to love each other through the children who loved them both.

Alicia gripped Sloan's hand one last time. Standing, she quickly turned and went into Carter's embrace. "Welcome home, stranger," she said cheerfully.

He enfolded her in an embrace made haphazard by the two boys who ran in to cling to his pants legs. Over Alicia's shoulder he looked at Sloan.

His eyes flashed a thousand messages and she received each one. He had missed her. He was miserable. He was tired, weary of the world, of life without her.

"I was lonesome for you, so I called Sloan to come down and spend the day with me," Alicia said.

"Hello, Sloan."

"Hello, Carter. How was New York?"

"Cold and rainy."

"You don't seem to be able to escape the rain," Alicia said, demonstrating amazing recuperative powers. "It rained almost the whole time you were in San Francisco, didn't it?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes melting into Sloan's.

"Boys, please stop smothering Carter and say hello to Sloan," Alicia instructed. Obediently they each mumbled a hello to Sloan and then ran out of the house again.

In the ensuing awkward silence Sloan spun around frantically and rushed toward the door of the house. "I was just planning to leave. I'd better call a cab."

"No, Sloan, you must stay until after dinner," Alicia wailed.

"I can't. I really have to get back."

"Stand right there," she said. "Don't do anything until I chase down David and Adam."

After Alicia left Carter sighed as he followed Sloan into the house. He couldn't let her go without her knowing how much he wanted her, how much he needed her, how much he loved her. He had to speak it aloud one last time or forever regret it. "Sloan, I—"

"Don't," she said through grinding teeth. Her back was to him as she braced rigid arms on the back of a chair. "Don't say anything."

"I've got to, goddammit."

"No. Please. If you do, I won't be able to stand it."

"Sloan, don't call a cab," Alicia said, stepping into the room, oblivious of the drama taking place. "The boys want to drive you to the airport so they can see the planes."

"No," Sloan objected quickly. "Carter just came from the airport."

"I don't mind."

"You stay, Carter," Alicia said. "I'll take Sloan now and you can pick her up next week when she comes for the wedding."

Sloan felt like Alicia had kicked her swiftly and firmly in the stomach. "I won't be at the wedding."

Now it was Alicia's turn to look dumbfounded. "But, Sloan, you have to be!"

Nothing on earth could compel her to sit and listen to Carter pledging his love and life to another woman. Any woman. Even a woman Sloan loved, too. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I'll have guests at Fairchild House by then. I can't leave it. You'll

have to consider the trip today my wedding congratulations."

Alicia looked upset and disconsolate. "But you missed my first wedding," she said petulantly. "I can't believe you'll miss this one, too."

"I hate to disappoint you, Alicia, but I can't . . . I can't be at your wedding."

Her tone brooked no arguments, though Alicia offered a few. Carter didn't say anything.

They left a few minutes later. Alicia was explaining to the boys how airplanes fly as she backed the car out the driveway.

Sloan risked one last look at the house. Carter was standing on the deck, staring directly at her. The wind was tearing through his hair. His hands were shoved into his pants pockets and his shoulders were hunched defensively, against the wind or against some internal enemy, she couldn't decide. His face, cast as it was in deep shadow, was inscrutable.

---

At least I still have this, Sloan thought as she served the custard with caramel sauce to the guests surrounding the dining table. Fairchild House was filled to capacity. All the bedrooms upstairs were occupied. Save one. But that one didn't count.

She would survive. She had before. She would again.

Fairchild House would require all her energy, physical and mental. This is what she was committed to. This was her life. Everything she had, she'd pour into making the bed and breakfast a success.

Friday evening. At two o'clock today Carter and Alicia had been married. He was permanently out of her life. From now on, her heart would belong to her business.

After dinner was over, Sloan went into her room and crossed it in darkness, switching on a lamp on her bureau.

Absently she reached up and drew the pins from her hair, one by one, slowly,

until her hair fell in heavy waves onto her shoulders. She combed both hands through it, revolving her head on her neck to ease the tension of pretending happiness when actually grief as wide and deep as a chasm had severed her heart in two.

She unzipped her skirt and stepped out of it gracefully, folding it carefully over the back of a chair.

She had unbuttoned her blouse and was peeling it off her shoulders when she happened to glance in the mirror and see Carter sitting in the easy chair across the room.

"What are you doing here?" she managed.

"Watching a most entertaining and stimulating striptease."

"Damn you, Carter, answer me. And how did you get in? The doors were locked."

"I broke in the back door and relocked it without anyone discovering me." His grin was boyishly proud.

"What are you doing here?" she fairly screamed, knotting her hands into fists at her sides.

He lunged out of the chair and bounded toward her, plastering her against him. "Don't worry. I'm not committing adultery. I'm not married and I won't be until you can take a few hours off and we can run down to City Hall."

She sagged in surrender and became pliant against the rock hardness of his body. Over the heel of his hand, she blinked away furious tears and stared at him in wide-eyed incomprehension.

"What happened?" she asked. "Why aren't you married?"

She let him pull her down to the bed.

"Alicia asked to see me before the ceremony, and confessed what she saw as a dire transgression, making me feel like the biggest hypocrite in the world."

"You can imagine what I felt like when she confessed to me, saying that a woman

like me would never do anything like that. And here I'd been sleeping with her fiancée. How did things ever become so complex?"

"We fell in love. No one, not even us, counted on that." He slipped his hand under her hair to massage her nape.

Sloan asked, "And then what happened?"

"Then I took both her hands and looked her straight in the eye and asked her if she loved me. She said yes she loved me, but not in 'that way.' And when I asked her what way she meant, she said, 'Not in the way a wife is supposed to love her husband. Not enough to share your bed. Not enough to keep from wanting to return Mac's calls which I've been refusing.' Then to her great surprise, I hugged her and kissed her with more enthusiasm than I ever have, and told her that I thought she was a perfectly wonderful woman for Jim and for some other fortunate man, but that I felt she might not be the woman for me."

Sloan had propped her chin on his sternum and was looking up into his face.

"Carter, did . . ." She wet her lips. "Did you tell Alicia about me?"

"I admitted that you and I had become very close friends and that I was returning to Fairchild House to see if my being engaged to her had been the only deterrent to our becoming more involved."

"And was it?"

"Absolutely. I intend to become very involved."

She smiled against his chest. "And Alicia didn't seem to care?"

He chuckled. "She may be more intuitive than either of us give her credit for. She cocked her head to one side and studied me shrewdly. Then she said, 'There are a lot of bedrooms in that old house and personally I think they could be put to better use.' I took that as an endorsement. In any event, she was laughing when I stripped off my necktie and asked who

was available to drive me to the airport."

Sloan snuggled closer. "I'm glad," she said in a whisper. "I couldn't have ever been completely happy if she hadn't been the one to free you."

"Nor could I."

"What are we going to do?"

"Are you referring to the immediate future? If so, that's a stupid question." His hand found her breast.

"Um, yes," she sighed. "But I mean about your house and your work and Fairchild House. I don't want to give it up, Carter."

"You won't. I'd never ask you to, and I love this old house. But, and I underline the but, there are going to be some changes made. I'm bringing a few bucks into this marriage and some of them are going to be used to hire you some help. A cook, someone to clean, someone to help you serve—"

"But I love the cooking."

"And you can still do it. Just not all the time. Some afternoons I may want you to be making wild love to me, not preparing bouillabaisse." He kissed her on the tip of her nose. "I could work here, even in this room. We can make this our base of operation, but I want you to take some time off periodically. I want to travel with you, take you places, show you things, show you off."

"Are you that proud of me?"

"I'm that proud of you. You're the most lovable woman I've ever met. You always have been, Sloan. You just picked sorry candidates to show you how lovable you are."

"I believe that," she said, lightly touching his lips. "Because of you, I believe that. I am loved."

He pressed her palm to his mouth. "You are loved." ♥

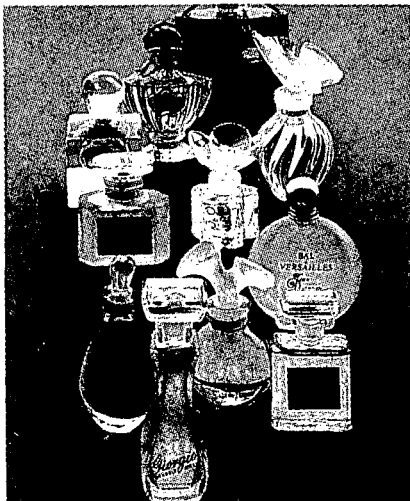
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She seems the picture of the perfect child.  
But if you look closely you can see how  
rejection, fear and constant humiliation have  
left scars that have tragically affected her  
childhood.

So now only a shattered spirit remains.  
And the light of laughter has gone out.  
Remember that words hit as hard as a fist.  
So watch what you say.  
You don't have to lift a hand to hurt your  
child.

**Take time out. Don't take it out on your kid.**



Write: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, Box 2866E, Chicago, IL 60690

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# A SLIMMER WAISTLINE IS AS CLOSE AS YOUR PHONE.

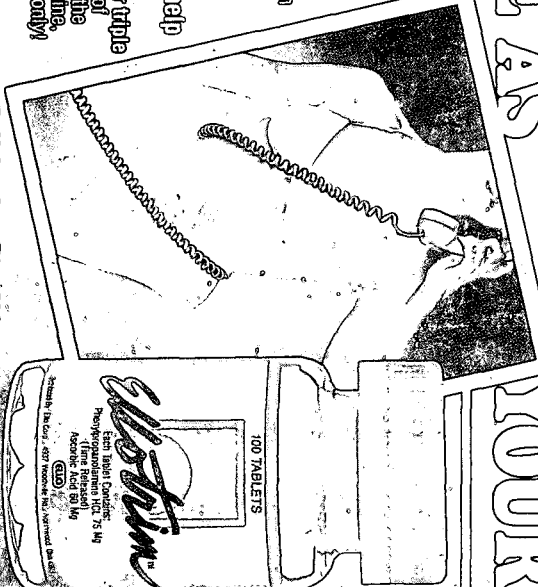
There are many ways to lose weight. But the easiest is to pick up a phone, dial our toll-free number, and order **Elliotin™**, caffeine-free Diet Aids, the most effective appetite suppressant available without a prescription.

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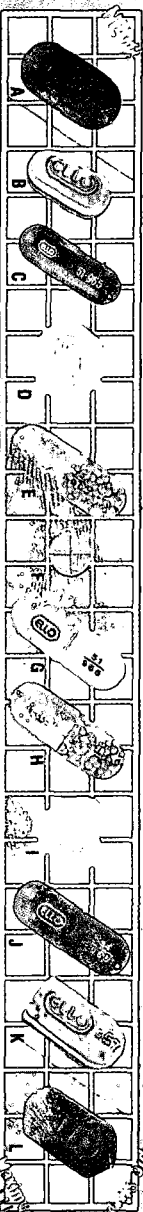
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Use only as directed.